

Publication status: This preprint has not been published elsewhere.

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<https://doi.org/10.1590/2596-304x202527e20251087>

Submitted on: 2025-10-14

Posted on: 2025-10-14 (version 1)

(YYYY-MM-DD)

10.1590/2596-304x202527e20251087

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## **Elusive Horizons: The Limitations of Comparative Literature as an Autonomous Discipline in Iran**

**Horizontes Elusivos: As Limitações da Literatura Comparada como Disciplina Autônoma no Irão**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the current state of comparative literature in Iran, a discipline introduced nearly a century ago but never granted an independent department at any university. It explores various factors contributing to this situation, including social and political issues, the dominance of national literature departments, curriculum development, and, most critically, extreme nationalistic tendencies embedded in all these aspects. The study also analyzes the condition of Iranian humanities before and after the 1979 revolution, considering historical and political contexts relevant to comparative literary studies. Despite the efforts of many scholars over the past decades, Iranian academia has yet to acknowledge the autonomy of comparative literature due to its interdisciplinary and transnational nature, which challenges national literary frameworks.

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature, Departments of National Literature, Interdisciplinary studies, Iran, Iranian Studies, National Identity, World Literature.

### **Resumo**

Este artigo analisa o estado atual da literatura comparada no Irão, uma disciplina introduzida há quase um século, mas que nunca obteve um departamento independente em nenhuma universidade. Explora diversos fatores que contribuíram para essa situação, incluindo questões sociais e políticas, a predominância dos departamentos de literatura nacional, o desenvolvimento curricular e, de forma mais crítica, as tendências nacionalistas extremas incorporadas em todos esses aspetos. O estudo também analisa a situação das humanidades iranianas antes e depois da Revolução de 1979, considerando os contextos históricos e políticos relevantes para os estudos literários comparados.

Apesar dos esforços de numerosos académicos ao longo das últimas décadas, a academia iraniana ainda não reconheceu a autonomia da literatura comparada devido à sua natureza interdisciplinar e transnacional, que desafia os enquadramentos literários nacionais.

**Palavras-chave:** Literatura Comparada, Departamentos de Literatura Nacional, Estudos Interdisciplinares, Irão, Estudos Iranianos, Identidade Nacional, Literatura Mundial.

## 1. Introduction

As an interdisciplinary field in humanities, comparative literature has always been the subject of scholarly debate around the world. The discipline's identity has constantly been in crisis, and the shift of its perspective during the previous decades has often bewildered its practitioners. While the crisis of comparative literature in the West revolves around theoretical and methodological debates, the situation in the Global South presents a different set of challenges. In many countries of the Global South, including Iran, the discipline faces significant barriers such as lack of institutional support, funding, and academic recognition. Scholars like Wellek, Bassnett, and Spivak have identified issues such as Eurocentrism and the absence of a unified theoretical framework as central to the discipline's crisis. These challenges are even more pronounced in non-Western contexts, where comparative literature often struggles to gain a foothold due to socio-political and economic constraints. Therefore, a context-specific approach is necessary to effectively address the concern of this research.

These issues are particularly severe in Iran. The absence of dedicated academic departments for comparative literature, coupled with socio-political barriers, hinders the systematic study and practice of the discipline. The crisis in Iran is not only about the lack of a unified theoretical framework but also about the marginalization of Persian literature and other non-Western traditions in global literary discourse. This institutional neglect and disconnect from global literary conversations make the crisis in Iran more complex and enduring.

This paper aims to categorize the obstacles to the formation of an independent department of comparative literature. The existence and policies of departments of national literature, the current curricula in both undergraduate and graduate programs, and the faculty at higher education institutions are the main contributing factors that will be discussed at length in the following sections. However, all these factors share one fundamental origin: extreme nationalistic tendencies in the country. These tendencies have not been specific to any historical period in Iran but have rather transformed into various forms throughout history. This core issue will also be discussed in different sections of this article in relation to the context.

## 2. Comparative Literature in Iran

The absence of a specific theoretical framework is threatening in the Iranian literary sphere since there is no official comparative literature department in any academic institution in the country, and as a result, comparative literature is practiced sporadically. Moreover, in addition to the omnipresent crisis of the discipline, Iranian comparative literature suffers from deeper and more serious issues that are specific to its own social, historical, and political context.

One of these crises is that comparative literature has been accused of being Eurocentric, and for good reasons. However, the discipline has not yet been able to move beyond Eurocentrism and focuses mostly on a limited number of literary traditions. Iran, not being among them, has usually been excluded from major practices of the discipline. One of the contributing factors is the country's literary context which can be considered static. This static context illustrates a lack of productive and meaningful cultural relationships, both domestically and internationally. In contrast, the practice of comparative literature necessitates dynamic interactions in both realms, and this isolation hinders such engagements. In other words, Persian literature has been lagging behind the timely progression of the so-called centers of the world. Furthermore, several social and political factors, which will be discussed below, contribute further to this delay. Therefore, in addition to the crises of comparative literature in, for instance, Europe, the discipline in Iran faces other issues and challenges that need to be addressed in relation to their corresponding context.

Alireza Anushiravani, the renowned scholar who has dedicated many years to spreading and teaching comparative literature (Anushiravani, 2019, p.82) has been asking one question for many years, the same question that this article also addresses: why has there not been an independent department of comparative literature in Iran? He argues that in Iran it has never been possible for comparative literature to have three necessary means for development at once: an institution, an academic journal, and a student-faculty association (Anushiravani, 2010, p.11). Accordingly, comparative literature is not considered a discipline with its own methodology in Iran, which has delayed its proper definition in the Iranian context (Anushiravani, 2011, p.3). He also argues that the problem is rooted in the misconception of the schools, theories, and applications of comparative literature without considering the political, social, and historical contexts in which those schools and theories were originally employed. Moreover, he claims that the hasty incorporation of comparative literature in Iran as a sub-discipline and under departments of Persian Language and Literature without proper planning including recruiting proper faculty and planning

curriculum and human resources hinders the formation of a comparative literature department (Anushiravani, 2011, p.3). Similarly, Manuchehrian argues that the lack of multilingual scholars in Iranian higher education institutions impedes the development of comparative literature (Manuchehrian, 2012, p.207). Furthermore, according to Salehbeck, since there has been no academic and institutional urge to practice comparative literature in Iran, the discipline could never grow independently. It can be a consequence of the precarious state of the discipline in Iran as an unsuccessful imitation of the West (Salehbeck, 2009, p.19). Ultimately, recently Anushiravani concluded that all his efforts have been futile and that the elimination of comparative literature in Iran would be more practical than further trying to establish it as an autonomous discipline (Anushiravani, 2019, p.108).

As mentioned above, several scholars have repeatedly asked why Iran does not have an independent department of comparative literature. This repetition demonstrates the stagnant state of the field in Iran whose reasons should be examined in different areas and more profoundly than it has already been. To this end, this article seeks to conduct a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted crises affecting comparative literature in Iran. It aims to provide novel insights into the stagnation of this field, addressing previously overlooked issues that contribute to its current state.

### **2.1.Origins and Development**

The field of comparative literature in Iran has consistently faced struggles. Although comparative literature exists, in a way, under Persian language and literature at the graduate level, despite the abovementioned efforts of scholars over the years, an independent department or program for comparative literature has not yet been established. However, the absence of comparative literature in Iran over the long term cannot be merely limited to the scholars' lack of skill or effort; but rather, other more fundamental reasons must be addressed. Some scholars such as Anushiravani, Mirzababazadeh Fomeshi, and Ahmed among others have investigated the status of comparative literature in Iran and attempted to pave the way for a more dynamic future for the field. It has been five years since Anushiravani expressed disappointment in an article claiming: "After years of tireless effort to establish an independent department of comparative literature in Iran, I have come to the conclusion that it is unlikely to be achieved due to the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of the discipline" (Anushiravani, 2019, p. 81).

Although there is no independent comparative literature department in Iranian academia at the moment, thanks to the efforts of individual scholars in departments of English and Persian language and literature over the past few years, the field of comparative literature has gone through momentous and rapid development in terms of publications. Several academic centers and universities, including major institutions such as Shiraz University have offered new undergraduate and graduate *courses* dedicated to comparative literature, its theories, histories, and methodologies. For instance, courses titled ‘Fundamentals of Comparative Literature’ and ‘Literature and Cinema’ are offered as a part of the English literature graduate curriculum at Shiraz University. Nonetheless, despite all the above-mentioned progressions, numerous challenges and limitations impede the further development of the discipline.

To analyze and comprehend the current state and obstacles of comparative literature in Iran, it is important to closely examine its origin and progress in the country. The reasons behind the absence of a comparative literature department can be categorized into four main groups of limitations in the political and educational system of the country: political and social situations and paradoxes, departments of national literature, curricula, and faculties. They will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

## **2.2. Before and After the 1979 Islamic Revolution**

Fatemeh Sayyah, an esteemed scholar and professor of foreign languages and literatures, has been widely recognized as the first person who built the foundation of comparative literature in Iran. However, she was not a comparatist and worked within national literature boundaries. According to Anushiravani’s most recent take on Sayyah’s works, they do not qualify as comparative literature and Mohammad Golbon, who first used this title for Sayyah’s works, misinterpreted her academic research (Anushiravani, 2023, p. 261). This opinion has been blindly accepted by others without any solid proof. The instability and incoherent practice of comparative literature in Iran is evident in that the individual long thought to be the founder of the discipline in the country was neither trained in the field nor actually practiced it. Born in 1902, Sayyah pursued her studies in French Literature at Moscow University. Upon returning to Iran in 1938, she joined the newly established Faculty of Letters at the University of Tehran. She was “familiar with several foreign languages” (Ahmed, 2016, p. 197) such as English, French, German, and Russian. Her knowledge of these foreign languages is probably the reason why she is assumed to be the first practitioner of comparative literature in Iranian historiography.

At the age of 45 and due to premature death, her life and career came to an end, interrupting what could have been the origins of the field of comparative literature in Iran. Since she was Chair professor of the foreign languages and literatures program, and it was impossible to replace her with an equally qualified professor, the program was ‘temporarily’ closed. Ali Akbar Siyasi, the then Chancellor of the University of Tehran, announced in a memorial:

The passing of Fatemeh Sayyah marked a significant loss for the University of Tehran, as she was one of its esteemed professors. Her expertise in ‘the evaluation of literature’ and ‘Russian literature’ set her apart. The teaching of ‘the evaluation of literature’ necessitates proficiency in multiple foreign languages, a skill not commonly possessed. Regrettably, no other individual has been able to meet this criterion since Professor Sayyah’s departure, leading the university to discontinue offering this course. (Golbon, 2004, p. 44)

After Sayyah’s death in 1947, some professors, such as Abdol Hossein Zarrinkub and Lotf Ali Suratgar, tried to continue teaching foreign languages and literatures in the Department of Persian Language and Literature at the University of Tehran but being on the margin of a dominant national literature department, they did not succeed for long (Anushiravani, 2012, p. 485).

Several universities, such as the University of Tehran, Isfahan University, and Ferdowsi University of Mashhad (Ahmed, 2016, p.198), tried to revive teaching foreign languages and literatures approximately twenty years later, but they were limited in scope, focusing on studies of the influences between Persian and Arabic literatures; motivated by nationalistic tendencies, one implicit aim of such studies was to establish the superiority of the Persian literary tradition over Arabic literature (and culture). In the light of identity politics, therefore, comparative literature has been ever since a battleground for identity politics between Persian and Arabic, and Persian and Western literatures, rather than a discipline with a set of aesthetic aims. This scope has remained relatively unchanged over time due to various paradoxical reasons which will be discussed in the following sections.

Mirzababazadeh Fomeshi regards Sayyah's passing as “the end to an era” (Mirzababazadeh Fomeshi, 2017, p. 149), but I hold that there has never truly been an era for comparative literature in Iran, as Sayyah was a professor of foreign languages and not a comparatist. After her death, and until the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, comparative literature was dormant in Iran until the advent of a renewed wave of enthusiasm emerged among scholars and students of humanities (Ahmed, 2016, p. 198). The Islamic Revolution of 1979 which gave rise to political and cultural transformations played a significant role in the revival of this interest in a paradoxical manner. The Cultural

Revolution, a cultural aspect of the 1979 revolution, occurred between 1980 and 1983. It involved the purging of academic institutions of non-Islamic influences, particularly those derived from the West. Many scholars, including Hassan Honarmandi (1928–2002), Iranian writer and translator, were removed from their positions during this process (Ahmadi, 2002, p.302). Since the revolution led to increasing isolation from the rest of the world in various aspects, the urge to compensate for the inevitable and intricate isolation in other areas ignited the desire to reestablish links with other cultures and literatures. However, it did not result in any considerable progress in the state of comparative literature in Iran.

Despite all these challenges, there have been several attempts to establish independent comparative literature departments. One of these attempts, which was superficially successful, was a 2009 M.A. program at Kerman University which focused on

Persian-Arabic literary influences. This program was part of the Department of Persian Language and Literature and worked closely with the Department of Arabic Language and Literature. ... It was believed that national Persian and Arabic languages and literatures had a history of 1400 years of cultural, historical, religious, and literary exchanges and relations. The curriculum included courses such as comparative study of Persian and Arabic grammar, comparative literary history, comparative study of Persian and Arabic prose and poetry, and comparative translation. The main textbooks were either in Persian and Arabic or were Persian translations of Arabic books on comparative literature. (Anushiravani, 2012, p. 488)

### **2.3. Current Status**

Comparative literature in Iran has always been practiced superficially, relying on Western theories and schools of criticism which have mostly been inapplicable to Persian literary movements and literary productions in general. Iranian scholars, most of whom “were not comparatists by training” (Anushiravani, 2012, p.485), such as Abdol Hossein Zarrinkub (1922–2008), Khosro Farshivard (1929–2009), and Mohammad Ali Eslami Nadushan (1925–2022) followed the French School of comparative literature without considering the social, historical, cultural, and political context of Europe when it was practiced, copied the methodology to a context that had totally different needs, capacities, and capabilities. The French School of comparative literature investigates the sources of literary works from different countries and how they influence each other. Due to various reasons which will be discussed in the following paragraphs, not only did Iranian comparatists

ever leave the French school behind, but also, they continued the quest to find how Persian literature influenced other cultures. Therefore, since comparative literature is a product of the corresponding historical and geographical context, such applications do not yield long-term results: for instance, where direct exchanges between Persian and another language has been non-existent, due to historical reasons, it is impossible to practice the discipline. Similarly, studying classical literary traditions, such as Persian itself, and their role and status at present become impossible because the discipline, as it is practiced, does not offer the theoretical or methodological tools to engage wider and more diverse questions.

Nevertheless, the French school has been popular in Iran because it provides scholars with the means to narrate superiority over other nations, be they Arab or Western. For instance, Hassan Honarmandi's *Andre Gide et la littérature persane: recherche sur les sources persanes de l'oeuvre de Gide*—whose subtitle is “Comparative literature in the service of Persian literature” (Honarmandi, 1967), Djavad Hadidi's (1932–2002) dissertation on Voltaire's view of Islam, and Shojaeddin Shafa's (1918–2010) *Iran in World Literature*, Hasan Javadi's *Persian Literary Influence on English Literature*, Reza Taher-Kermani's *The Persian Presence in Victorian Poetry*, and Amrollah Abjadian's *The Victorian Wasteland: A Study of Matthew Arnold's Sohrab and Rustum* among others are examples of such attempts to demonstrate the influence of Persian literature in the world and consequently its superiority, or at the very least its significant position among the world's literary traditions which indicates their extreme nationalism. The same is applicable to theoretical books of comparative literature in Iranian market, including those written in Persian and those that are translated. Recently translated books in Iran were mostly originally written and published before the 1979 revolution. The original publication dates of these books, their translation dates in Iran, “and their chronological order tell us that comparative literature in Iran has no substantial and continuous connection with global comparative literature” (Khezri, 2021, p.103) and emphasizes its nationalistic values.

Almost all the twenty available theoretical books on comparative literature in Iran are pre-occupied with the French School. Sājidi's *From Comparative Literature to Literary Criticism*, Dadvar's *Initiation à la Littérature Comparée*, and Liṭāfatī and Farāhānī's *Comparative Literature in Oscillation* are the only three exceptions. However, the contribution of these three books to the development of the discipline in Iran is difficult to quantify, as they have been exclusively developed for students in the department of French. [...] From those twenty translated theoretical books on comparative literature in Iran, thirteen

books have been translated from Arabic comparative literature. [...] The remaining seven books [are translated] from English and French languages. (Khezri, 2021, p.103)

The existence of such extreme nationalistic tendencies coupled with this limited employment of an intellectual tool that has the potential for more engaging and rigorous purposes has hindered the progress of the field during the early stages of its growth in Iran.

After World War II, comparative literature “help[ed] the younger generation of Americans understand and engage more effectively with the international cross-currents and exchanges of postwar years, as well as with the cultural and the political challenges of the Cold War era” (Behdad, 2012, p. 609). The danger that threatened the discipline at this point was the possibility of comparative literature being reduced to only producing articles that would include focusing too much on finding superficial similarities rather than engaging with the literary works. The only aspect of this school that Iranian scholars have practiced has been conducting such comparisons with the same old purpose of arguing their superiority. This time, the focus shifted from searching for influences to examining similarities. In other words, any resemblance was deemed sufficient to justify comparisons and was employed as a tool to assert the superiority of Persian culture over others.

#### **2.4.The Role of National Identity in Complicating Comparative Literature in Iran**

Although the foundation and progress of comparative literature in Iran was accomplished by scholars who had studied abroad, mostly at Western institutions, many of them were either anti-West or anti-Arab. Their tendencies originated from the nationalistic propaganda initiated by Reza Shah Pahlavi (1878–1944) which drew on the history of Persia to revive and preserve ancient traditions, cultures, and languages, a project to which Sayyah also contributed. Therefore, literary scholars, along with the state, focused on the nationalistic glorification of Persian language and literature and the *Aryan* heritage.

The dominant approach in Persian literature was balanced in the 1980s, which resulted in a more equal situation regarding the nationalistic view (Khezri, 2012, p.326). However, this failure can be attributed in part to the opposing political approaches taken by the Pahlavi government, which emphasized the superiority of the Aryan race by celebrating the pre-Islamic era in Iran; under the

Islamic Republic, even though the country was isolated, the extreme emphasis on pre-Islamic national identity was shifted in favor of post-Islam cultural identity. This opposition created a stark contrast between the two regimes. Such contrasts over a short period of time have greatly influenced the cultural environment for the development of comparative literature and as a result have always shadowed comparative literary research.

The extreme nationalism which started with celebrating the Aryan identity and pre-Islamic Persia sometimes created a sense of superiority over non-Persians within Iranians which turned into racism (Asgharzadeh, 2007, p.211). However, a stop was put on the celebration of the *pure Aryan* race and pure de-Arabicized Persian language by the 1979 Islamic Revolution which in turn started celebrating its own different identity. Instead, the Islamic identity became superior. Although this was a drastic change of agenda, the feeling of superiority over *others* was still present in the country. But this time, this *other* did not include Arabs anymore because, in this new ideological era, both Iranians and Arabs are considered as part of the Muslim *ummah* that shares a common religious language and belief. Therefore, the grand narrative of the country has been celebrating the Islamic heritage. As a result, Iran has been the land of extreme nationalism and racism although from different perspectives, which has also influenced academia and oriented comparative literature towards one goal: establishing the superiority over others.

As long as the nationalist point of view is dominant in Iran, comparative literature will not have any other meaning – or intellectual space to grow – than in national literature departments, especially Persian or Arabic. Therefore, the problem of comparative literature in Iran is much more fundamental than just not having an independent department. It is rooted in deeper cultural and historical ideologies which orientates not only scholars of humanities but also society at large.

It is worth mentioning that there is a strong dichotomy between Arab-centrism and Perso-centrism in the history of Iran. The contrast between the Pahlavi era and the Islamic Republic is the legacy of centuries of extremism in this regard. The Iranian scientist Abu-Rayhan al-Biruni (973–1040) expressed his preference as follows: “To insult me in Arabic is more pleasant than to praise me in Persian” (Al-Biruni, 2004, p.98). Therefore, this lack of moderation is not specific to the last two centuries but rather it dates back to the advent of Islam in Iran.

The extreme nationalistic ideology during the Pahlavi era hindered the progress of comparative literature because of its focus on preserving the Persian language and literature and the absence of a transnational point of view regarding comparison. The emphasis on establishing the superiority

of the Aryan race often focused on the Persian-Arab dichotomy, aiming to demonstrate any potential advantage at any cost. However, the relationship with the West was perceived differently. Scholars who compare Iranian cultural productions with Western ones often seek to highlight how the latter has been influenced by Persian works. Despite this, there is an underlying awareness among them that the West is considered superior. These scholars aim to show that although the West is superior, it has been influenced by Persian culture, suggesting that Iranian culture is so distinguished that it has impacted its superior counterpart. Consequently, this insistence on Persian heritage coexisted with the evaluation of the West as superior and as a model to be emulated. However, this ideology was frowned upon after the Islamic Revolution and until now. The dominant ideology is extreme anti-West Islamism in all disciplines. Many of the authors who work on comparisons between Persian and Arabic literatures after 1979 revolution seek to establish the traces and impact of Islam on Persian culture to “determine an Islamic identity for Persian literature” (Khezri, 2021, p.99). The exertion of this ideology has dictated complete isolation in every possible way, including in educational institutions. Therefore, almost all kinds of international interactions were immediately blocked. As a result, comparative literature, due to its transnational nature, was threatening the supremacy of this ideology’s narrative of itself and its Western (and non-Western) others. Although the Islamic Revolution was a transnational movement itself and drew on *ummah*, its political agenda stood in sharp contrast to that of non-Islamic movements, and its transnationality did not supersede Islam. Similarly, other prominent political groups in Iran at the time included the Communists, primarily represented by the Tudeh Party of Iran, as well as other groups with similar ideologies. These groups, while also considered transnational, were aligned with pro-USSR and pro-China sentiments. Moreover, the interdisciplinary nature of comparative literature and its close affiliation with studying social and political contexts amplifies the threat. Therefore, after the Islamic Revolution, followed by the Cultural Revolution, no comparative literature program was founded. The omnipresent Islamic narrative also shapes the Iranian humanities by emphasizing the Arabic language, the history of Islam, and its importance in shaping Persian literature, Iranian science and identity. Thus, although the two recent regimes employed two opposite strategies regarding their view of nationalism and foreign policies, the result was the cultivation of an environment that would lead to the failure of comparative literature. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that faculty members as well as students face various difficulties and barriers in accessing or publishing comparative research materials, such as books, journals,

databases, and conferences due to political sanctions, and economic or academic restrictions, which can be the reason behind their lack of motivation for joining the more up-to-date circles. Therefore, the isolation of the country after 1979 and the lack of linguistic training and insufficient exchanges has meant the very slow evolution of university structures. This isolation also made it difficult to learn foreign languages, which are necessary for comparative literature studies and therefore became a huge obstacle against the progress of comparative literature.

## **2.5. Departments of National Literature**

Among Iranian literary scholars, comparative literature is often considered a subcategory of world literature, which is, in its own turn, conceived either as Arabic, English, or, less often, French literatures. For instance: comparative literature as a course is offered in Persian literature departments, focusing on comparisons between Persian and Arabic literary productions, and World Literature is part of the graduate curriculum in English literature.

As mentioned earlier, this narrow definition originates from the way that the study of foreign languages in Iran is structured along national lines (see table 1). These departments are formed presuming the sufficiency of the national perspective, and each only focuses on one literature. Nevertheless, even these languages have a transnational status that cannot be pinned down solely on national history. In other words, their significance is shaped not just by the histories of the countries where they are spoken, but also by broader, global influences, which are usually ignored in these departments of national literature.

A remarkable consequence of this division is that students enrolled in these programs will not have the opportunity to expand their horizons and will be limited to the study of literature in one specific language, missing the opportunity to study more than one literary tradition – which would encourage comparative approaches. This restrictive scope, formed under the influence of romantic nationalism, defines literary history and excludes the transnational scope from literary studies, hence one of the reasons why comparative literature has not found its proper place as a discipline in Iranian academia.

One of the main obstacles impeding the development of comparative literature in Iran, which is the direct manifestation of the above-mentioned mindset of establishing national superiority, is the

concentration on the departments of national literature. These departments hold a nationalist and ethnocentric approach toward literature which prioritizes the superiority of their own literary heritage and culture. This dominant approach among Iranian scholars has limited the scope of literary studies in the country and has barred them from engaging global spheres. Consequently, they have been reluctant to acknowledge comparative literature for what it truly is – an autonomous discipline, concerned with transnationality and interdisciplinarity that might undermine their authority and influence in academia.

Since offering a comparative literature program requires special “linguistic preparation and intellectual perspective,” (Bernheimer, 1995, p.99) not all academic institutions are capable of offering one.

Traditionally, one of the most accentuated prerequisites for comparative literature students or faculty members was familiarity with more than two languages in addition to their first language. At Iranian institutions and universities, the prevailing policy emphasizes conducting more research on Persian and Arabic literatures, preserving and spreading these two languages. Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, expressed criticism of instructing English in K-12 and higher education in Iran as it paves the way for “Western cultural invasion” (The New York Times, 2018). He also opposes teaching English in Iran and advocates for teaching Arabic instead (BBC, 2016). The introduction of political biases into academia has had a major negative impact on the quality and quantity of foreign language teaching and research at Iranian institutions.

Arabic, as the language of the Qur’an and Hadith, is inherently regarded as sacred by a government whose identity is rooted in Islam. This significance is so profound that Arabic is often viewed as superior to Persian by the government. Therefore, spreading it in the country is favored over any other foreign language.

Departments of foreign languages and literatures cannot by any chance threaten the authority of Persian language and Islamic ideology at least in the academia because they are clearly in the periphery. However, outside academia, foreign languages such as English, French, and German are considered more important for several reasons. First, the students concerned with their future careers feel the need to connect with more global spheres, which cannot be achieved by just using Persian language. As a result, foreign language programs usually have higher admission requirements in *Konkur* (national university entrance exam) than Persian language programs. Second, given the deteriorating economy of the country, the job market for those who graduate

with a degree in humanities is not favorable, and knowing more languages provides students with the opportunities such as teaching these languages. Third, the unstable political situation in the country has forced the young generation to seek every opportunity to immigrate. Familiarity with more languages, mainly English, paves the way for their immigration and gives them a higher chance in the process of applying to foreign universities. To act against this huge wave of immigration, the government constantly makes it more difficult for students to take necessary exams in foreign languages by taking measures to cancel the scheduled exams such as IELTS (IMNA, 2023).

The following table demonstrates the distribution of programs in different languages and literatures in Iran at graduate level. As the table demonstrates nearly half of the capacity and resources of Iranian universities in languages and literatures are dedicated to Persian. The second place is occupied by English because as mentioned above the demand for it—to facilitate immigration and the better job market—is higher than other foreign languages.

Language	Number of programs	Percentage
Persian	364	48.1
English	220	29
Arabic	115	15.2
French	42	5.5
Russian	8	1.05
German	6	0.79
Japanese	1	0.13
Urdu	1	0.13
Total	757	100

Table 1. The distribution of national literature programs and students in Iran.

Schools of foreign languages and literatures consist of departments of distinct national languages and literatures. For the most part they practice English, Arabic, and less often French, which is a significant obstacle in fulfilling the preliminary requirements for the emergence of an independent Comparative Literature department. Therefore, since universities scarcely go beyond these languages – which are all conceived to be nationally rooted – the organization of teaching foreign languages at Iranian universities is designed in a way that will not support the creation of a comparative literature program.

## 2.6. The Myth of Iranian School of Comparative Literature

Establishing a new school of comparative literature requires a robust theoretical basis. Despite this prerequisite, several scholars have proposed the formation of an Iranian school of comparative literature. Mirzai and Salimi, for instance, argue that this school acts as a “catalyst for the

understanding and reception of comparative literature as an academic discipline in Iran” Mirzai and Salimi, 2010, p. 2). Furthermore, it contributes to “enriching the national literature” Mirzai and Salimi, 2010, p.7).

Akbari also advocates for this school, asserting that due to Iran’s cultural pluralism, a comparison between two Iranian authors from different periods is essential. However, this perspective is redundant, as it is already inherent in comparative literature. The formation of a new school should focus on theoretical innovation rather than merely on the language of comparison or the country of origin.

Zeynivand argues for an Iranian school that promotes an “Islamic-Iranian approach” (Zeynivand, 2011, p. 1) to literature, in contrast to the traditional “Eurocentric, colonial, and imperial” (Zeynivand, 2011, p. 5) perspectives. He posits that this new school heavily relies on Islamic Iranian identity and aims to establish Iran’s role in the global evolution of literature. This claim stands in sharp contrast to many of the major premises of comparative literature. The school he proposes is built on “Iranian culture and identity” and “religious doctrine” (Zeynivand, 2011, p. 5) as its main pillars.

However, what Zeynivand describes cannot be considered comparative literature. This so-called school reinforces the prevalent nationalistic view within Iranian academia. It lacks the vital interdisciplinarity and multilingualism that define comparative literature. Instead of contributing to the field, it further solidifies the status of national literature departments and the Iranian-Islamic identity within the French school, which are significant obstacles to the development of comparative literature in Iran. The problem of extreme nationalism is fundamental in Iran, to the extent that even attempts to address it have become compromised.

Such perceptions of comparative literature as a discipline in Iran are superficial and demonstrate a lack of deep understanding of the nuanced challenges it faces. Like any discipline, comparative literature relies heavily on academic institutions. Since there is no independent department for it in the country, the term ‘Iranian School of Comparative Literature’ is misleading at best. Viewing the issue this way creates a vicious cycle. The studies mentioned have not contributed anything new in terms of theory or methodology; instead, they complicate the situation by introducing a

new term that creates an illusion of progress. Naming a non-existent school without a solid theoretical foundation fails to advance the discipline.

### **3. Curriculum**

The absence of a comparative literature department in Iran can also be attributed to the curriculum and teaching techniques which have been for a long time employed at the departments of language and literature. There is a significant gap in the curricula of Persian language and literature departments in Iran. Few of these departments offer courses that introduce students to comparative literature. Consequently, most of the graduates of Persian language and literature, like many of those of foreign languages and literatures in Iran, are largely unfamiliar with comparative literature and do not pursue it further.

This absence is not merely an oversight; it is rooted in a systemic educational shortfall which is exacerbated by the outdated and rigid curricula that predominantly emphasize classical Persian, Arabic, and English classical canons. Such a narrow focus limits students' exposure to diverse literary perspectives. Islamic Arabic texts are often included in the syllabi of English literature courses, reflecting the dominant narrative of privileging the Iranian Islamic identity. This practice lacks academic justification and aligns with one of the objectives of the Islamic Republic: to disseminate Islamic thought and indoctrinate the young with the 'right' way of life; courses such as Studying Translated Islamic Texts and Islamic Literature in English which focus on close reading religious texts in English. Therefore, there is plenty of room for enhancement in the curriculum to provide a more recently updated theoretical and methodological framework that caters to comparative analysis. For instance, it is crucial to include a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective to better equip students with a well-rounded education. In other words, diversifying and enriching the readings and expanding the scope of the syllabi to other media, such as visual arts and games, broadens the students' perspectives.

These outdated approaches not only limit course offerings but also impact teaching methodologies. The problematic teaching methods applied at Iranian humanities departments rely heavily on memorization, recitation, and imitation, rather than on critical thinking, creativity, and originality. Students are expected to recite poems and memorize impractical biographies, dates, titles, themes, styles, and quotations of canonical authors and works, rather than analyzing them in depth to view

them in relation to their historical, social, cultural, or literary contexts. As a result, students are frequently discouraged from expressing their own thoughts or interpretations and exploring alternative or lesser-known voices or genres.

Moreover, these national literature departments only focus on the *literary* products of their corresponding nations and within that language in isolation without viewing them in dialogue with other literary and artistic spheres; this is one of the elements that hold back the humanities in Iran. In other words, their definition of text is not updated, and they still consider only poetry and fiction as their scope of research. The interdisciplinary, multilingual, and “supranational” (Guillen, 1993, 3) spirit that characterizes comparative literature is structurally made impossible at Iranian schools of humanities. Moreover, including courses on more recent technological developments, such as digital humanities, social media, and AI, would provide students with new tools to reveal those aspects of texts that cannot be uncovered using traditional close reading.

Another significant reason why Iranian academia is not well-equipped to organize comparative literature departments is that there is not enough communication among different disciplines within the humanities. The relationships among these departments, especially when it comes to the relationships between national literature departments, are usually that of hostility instead of comradery. The victim of this isolation of different departments will be students enrolled in their programs who will graduate without developing a more diverse perception of literature and humanities in general. In order to provide the students with a wider transdisciplinary broad perspective, they should be given the opportunity to enroll in courses offered in other departments. Such collaborations among the departments are theoretically possible in Iran, but in practice, one will rarely be given a chance to do it due to the absence of effective commutation.

In a nation characterized by preconceived notions of education, English literature programs, which provide an unofficial path to a wider world of literary studies – though with its own limits – have also had to transform to adapt to the Iranian academia. One major problem is the Eurocentrism of English literature, which is still present in many departments, as most undergraduate syllabi focus on the masterpieces of English literature—sometimes referring only to works from England and not the entire United Kingdom. Moreover, clinging to the masterpieces of an area or period of study and resisting accepting other more recent cultural products as their object of study resists making literary studies contemporary and relevant to lived experience. Titles such as ‘Masterpieces of French Literature’ are still seen among the courses offered in these departments,

which, according to Rey Chow, reflect their “Eurocentric, nation-oriented model of literature” (Bernheimer, 1995, p.109), which is not acceptable even within their own national research area. This demonstrates that the curriculum is obsolete and out of touch with contemporary developments in literary education around the world, which is a general characteristic of Iranian humanities. This rigidity in curricula ties closely to the training and motivation of faculty, which will be explored next.

#### **4. Faculty Training and Recruitment: A Barrier to Change in Iranian Higher Education**

Another significant obstacle decelerating the progress and formation of independent comparative literature departments and/or programs in Iran is the shortage of qualified and competent faculty members who are well-educated and capable of teaching and conducting research in this field.

A significant number of professors and instructors who teach literature at Iranian universities have received their education in the abovementioned departments of national literatures. As stated earlier, the curriculum is oftentimes obsolete due to several factors, one of which is the inability of Iranian scholars to study foreign languages abroad and return to Iran. Therefore, on the teaching side, the very same educational program in literary studies is reproduced, which means that transcending such programs in favor of broader curriculum cannot happen. As a result, future professors, having been trained in such a system, do not come to possess the skills and tools for comparative research and analysis, such as knowledge of more than one foreign language, reflecting on the connection between literary theories and lived experience in different historical contexts, critical approaches beyond Eurocentric ideas, and cultural studies, with a broader understanding of the text, among others.

Furthermore, many professors and instructors who teach literature are not interested or motivated, to pursue comparative studies or refuse to pursue new methods on par with the latest developments and innovations in the field. This happens because the knowledge system has trained them to think in that specific way, and not beyond it. Moreover, there is resistance among Iranian scholars against studying other cultural products than written literature. Such biases, fortified by the bureaucratization of conventional literary studies stand in the way of disciplinary evolutions that would take literary studies beyond conventional conceptualizations of the narrative.

In addition to the faculty members, many graduate students demonstrate an interest in writing their thesis in comparative literature despite all the barriers. However, most of this research, for instance

in departments of English literature, is limited to the exhausted topics about British or American literary canons because that is all students have become familiar with throughout their education. It can, therefore, be expected that existing departments of national literature and their faculty members – most, if not all – do not welcome comparative research topics. Therefore, since English literature departments in other countries have also not integrated World Englishes and works in English as a World Literature language, establishing an independent department of comparative literature would be necessary to support those interested in broader research.

Anushiravani also asserts the vital need for more interdisciplinary approaches in Iranian academia. According to him, “the most significant characteristics of comparative literature start with inter- such as interdisciplinary, intercultural, and international. In other words, to go beyond the geographical, lingual, political, cultural, and disciplinary borders to gain a deeper understanding of oneself and others by studying world literature and culture without any limitations” (Anushiravani, 2019 p.83). However, such characteristics are in sharp contrast with the political attitudes and status of Iranian academia. For instance, under the Islamic Republic, the state promotes a definitive narrative of history and culture. This narrative can remain unchallenged only if it is not subject to critique from other perspectives, a role that the humanities in general, and comparative literature in particular, facilitate. Comparative literature as an interdisciplinary field requires the collaboration of various academic departments such as literature, philosophy, history, and film studies among others.

Higher education in Iran is a centralized system and governed by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology. They usually offer courses focusing on the 19<sup>th</sup> century or earlier periods in foreign languages departments, and they only discuss poetry, fiction, and drama. The electives with topics beyond these are limited and, therefore, the institutions do not encourage creative learning where students take initiative.

As Roland Greene explains, “any crisis of undergraduate training would be crisis of graduate training” (Bernheimer, 1995, p. 32). At Iranian universities, the crisis in undergraduate training is expanded to a more critical area. It has affected not only graduate students but also professors. Those who are trained in such a system, maintaining a Eurocentric perspective of focusing on written literary masterpieces of one national literature, will continue to teach those to undergraduate and graduate students who are expected to build the body of the scholars of

humanities in Iran. The lack of qualified faculty is a crucial factor that perpetuates the cycle of outdated curricula and teaching methods.

Throughout the previous decades, there have been examples of faculty members who graduated from foreign universities working in Iranian academia. They mostly try to make changes happen in these national departments, but their attempts have not been supported in an appropriate way, and therefore, the progress has been slow.

## **5. Conclusion**

Comparative literature has been searching for its place in the Iranian circles of humanities. It has sometimes been successful but has been developing with a lag in Iran. The described vicious cycle of education in literary studies and comparative literature and the absence of transnational and transdisciplinary perspectives will not stop until the isolated departments start communicating, cooperating with other languages and disciplines, welcoming more universal points of view, and expanding their research areas.

Most of the comparatists in Iran have been under the influence of the French school of comparative literature along with the extreme nationalistic biases which have fortified the urge for looking for influences through discovering similarities between literary products. Without being “comparatists by training” (Anushiravani, 2012, p. 479) to comprehend the actual function and goal of the discipline, many Iranians use comparative literature only as a tool to prove the superiority of Persian literature over others.

Considering all these barriers ranging from small-scale ones such as personal biases and prejudices, to large-scale problems including the dominant political atmosphere of the country, expecting a future for comparative literature in Iran does not seem realistic.

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**Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**Data availability statement**

Research data is available in the body of the document.

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