


World Literatures in Secondary School Curricula in Iran

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Abstract: In his article "World Literatures in Secondary School Curricula in Iran" Massih Zekavat argues that the inclusion and teaching of works of world literature is significant at the secondary school level because it introduces students to a dialogic and polyphonic world where difference is appreciated. Further, Zekavat posits that the pedagogical use of reading world literatures would be the case in particular in countries and cultures where essentialist and homogenizing objectives and practices of culture prevail. Zekavat's argumentation is based on the recent revival of Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* in the U.S. as a pedagogical tool and practice of reading and postulates that it would be applicable in particular to secondary education in Iran.

Massih ZEKAVAT

World Literatures in Secondary School Curricula in Iran

Arguably, many contemporary challenges like environmental crises, fundamentalism, terrorism, and war are directly or indirectly rooted in cultural contexts. For instance, scholars working in ecocriticism emphasize that many biases which led the overreach of the *homo sapiens* to assume stewardship over nature and to reduce nature to the level of instruments at their disposal are founded in matters of culture: "Indeed, many non-humanists would agree — often more readily than doubt-prone humanists do — that issues of vision, value, culture, and imagination are keys to today's environmental crises at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how, and legislative regulation" (Buell 5; see also Estok and Kim). Therefore, to rise to the challenges for a sustainable earth with all its cultures — human and other — we must engage in matters of culture including literature and this would make literature and literary studies socially relevant (see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek, *Comparative Literature*, "The New"; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári).

Fundamentalism, extremism, and essentialism are the direct result of cultural biases. Writing to underline the potentials of "criticism as cultural history" Catherine Belsey maintains that "The study of customary knowledge, past and present, brings home the degree to which subjectivity is culturally constructed and values historically relative. Western society stands to gain socially from a denaturalization of its meanings and values, as well as the cultural differences between itself and others ... As for the economic import, just think how much money (not to mention how many lives) would have been saved if the merest glimmering of an awareness of cultural difference had enlightened twenty-first-century foreign policy. No government with a developed sense of cultural history would have imagined we could impose Western-style democracy on Iraq and Afghanistan by the use of military force" (105). I posit that hardly can any cause besides culture be imagined which divides people more. Such criteria as sex, sexual orientation, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion lead to the development of various (sub)cultures and divide people. Of course, these are "natural" and unavoidable phenomena, but the problem arises when binary oppositions and what Karen J. Warren calls "the logic of domination" develop around any of these criteria (12). That is, when we define others against ourselves, when we divide people "either for us or against us." Consequently, instead of acknowledging and celebrating differences, we try to homogenize by eradicating them.

Dialogue on equal footing is one consistent way to end crises and to avoid future ones. Culture is the first realm to begin with our investigation in order to achieve reciprocal understanding. Such an exploration not only helps us find more affinities, but also appreciate differences. Reciprocal understanding would lead to mutual respect and celebration of differences, tolerance, and peace. This globally and deeply-felt need was an incentive for the revival and development of Goethe's 1827 notion of *Weltliteratur* since 1990s and particularly since the mid-2000s (see, e.g., Damrosch; D'haen; D'haen, Domínguez, Thomsen; D'haen, Damrosch, Kadir; Lawall; Pizer; Sturm-Trigonakis; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Mukherjee). For example, Martin Puchner posits that "For Goethe, world literature meant that through translation texts produced by different nations and locales were made available to all and thus would enhance mutual understanding: world literature as a contribution to world peace. This, of course, is often the justification for teaching world literature, that it enhances mutual understanding among cultures" (258).

Based on above, I argue that the inclusion of works of world literatures in secondary school curricula is an effective way to bring up children plurivocally. Reading world literatures in school acknowledges the existence of other cultures, as well as the significance of cultural diversity. Thus, students get to know about specifics of other cultures, their aesthetic and value systems, customs and traditions, history and society, literary and cultural production, and linguistic properties. As Marjorie Piechowski wrote in 1967 that the reading of world literatures can increase high school students' interest in reading, their familiarity mythology and themes in literature, critical thinking, and knowledge about cultures. Further, such readings and their effects contribute to cultural development within the host culture. As Mbwila Mpang Ngal remarks, "Culture survives only by

opening up to other cultures that can liberate them from their tendency to collective narcissism" (Ngal qtd. in Damrosch, *What Is* 144). Of course there are also culture-specific reasons to justify the importance of teaching works of world literature. The inclusion of world literatures in the Iranian school curricula can be justified with even more reasons. Currently, Iranians challenge their situation with regard to freedom of expression and human and civil rights. The inclusion of world literatures in education, as well as the expansion of Persian/Farsi literature as world literature and their political implications are ways which can improve Iran's circumstances.

In Iran's situation today, the reading of world literatures can also improve the status of matters on the "margins" because minorities are socially and legally ignored and women, various social classes, and religious and ethnic minorities are either silenced or excluded. The situation is even worse in the case of non-heterosexual orientation and the official line that "such a phenomenon does not exist in our country" prevents any discourse about sexuality other than heterosexual. Such underrepresentation, repression, exclusion, and/or denial within a society whose façade suggests a normative homogeneity inevitably drives "deviants" to guilty feelings of shame for their "transgressions." However, the arbitrary and compulsory nature of such discriminatory norms and standards would be revealed through opening up to cultures which recognize, tolerate, and include the "Other" and acknowledge their rights. The silenced "deviants" will consequently find that they are not alone and that they are not "guilty." Besides the political, there are also aesthetic reasons to justify the inclusion of world literatures in school curricula. With the advent of new media novel methods of communication, as well as the expansion of the entertainment industry there has recently been increasing exposure to products of foreign cultures. Telecommunication networks have provided the possibility of almost limitless communication via various devices, cinema and television are expanding, computer games entertain and thrill many, and cyberspace offers infinite promises. We should also remember that the meaning of "literature" has recently been extended especially with the wide espousal of cultural studies to include different kinds of media. Thus the use of the internet facilitates the transmission of world literatures even if only via Hollywood cinema. This phenomenon is, of course, two-edged: it can be both a threat and an opportunity.

On the one hand, it opens up new vistas to other cultures, it can provide the cultural knowledge necessary as the background for grasping the how-s and why-s of other cultures. Being familiar with Hollywood, for instance, can be useful in understanding US-American literature. In other words, the amount of background information a student in Iran needs to understand a work in US-American literature could be reduced if she/he is already familiar with US-American culture through its cinematic and television productions. This is a great promise for teaching world literatures, because the learner does not have to depend wholly on his/her knowledge of his/her own native culture as a point of departure. On the other hand, serious concerns have been expressed repeatedly about globalization (see, e.g., Fehskens <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/13>>). In general, the impact of globalizations by which local cultures and traditions are sidelined or even eliminated is one of the major concerns. This is in particular relevant with regard to US-American culture, for example "McDonaldization" (see, e.g., Ritzer). Or, besides their occasional violent and hostile implications and content, computer games can obscure orality and personal face-to-face communication (although video games can also be used as teaching tools, see, e.g., Soetaert, Bourgonjon, Rutten <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1794>>). The great reach and huge appeal of multimedia attracts a large array of audience from various races, sexes, ages, and cultures: although this can provide insights to other cultures, at the same time it can also provide wrong portraits and form misconceptions in its audience including the demonization of foreign cultures. Similarly, the preeminence of widely-spoken languages such as English threatens to diminish less-widely spoken languages (see, e.g., Eoyang <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/16>>).

In Iran, there is wide and expanding access to foreign cultural products like international food and restaurants, fashion, cinema, television, hypermedia, music, and high-tech consumerist products. This is of course a happy event to embrace, but on the condition that it does not mean the decline of an ancient culture such as that of Iran. The merits of globalization can be enjoyed so far as there is parallel attention both to national and international cultures and new technologies are employed for a better understanding of national issues. However, there is another major

concern: although various foreign cultural products have been entering Iran, it does not mean that these have conveyed various dimensions of other cultures in an appropriate or relevant manner. A portion of this flow has been controlled and restricted by the government in its selective policies which encourage some, admit others, and ban the rest. And another segment has been underrepresented for other reasons such as commercial interests or merely indifference in public discourse and here literature is again one of these less heeded realms. This can lead to a split, especially in the younger generation with the result of ignorance, hence unfounded narcissism and chauvinism. They encounter different traces of other cultures in their everyday life, but these usually belong to what is still considered as "low culture" in Iran. Meanwhile, they cannot find proper traces of "high" art and literature in the educational system. Iran did not signed international copy right law and even domestic copy right law is virtually ineffective. As a result, there is instant, easy, and inexpensive access to international cultural products and thus everyone watches US-American movies. Or, a large proportion of children's literature to which children are exposed these days belongs to foreign cultures, despite the rich Persian folklore tradition and thus children usually know Cinderella, Shrek, Tom and Jerry, and Snow White, among others, much better than the tales of their own culture. Although Iranians are exposed to some of their popular cultural products, there is not much that could be deemed serious and worthy to be studied. Meanwhile, textbooks are replete with the masterpieces of Iranian national art and literature.

Thus, the inclusion of world literatures in curricula would be relevant and useful as I suggest above. But what does "world literature(s)" mean in this context? Contrary to comparative literature, there seems to be a consensus on a single definition of world literature. Martin Puchner, for instance, believes "World literature is not, simply, all of literature. Rather, world literature is that subset of literature that maintains a crucial relation to the world. World literature is literature insofar as it pertains to the world: a worldly literature" (256). Puchner goes on to define world literature as "literature for the world, adopted and made by the world, oriented towards the world market, and oriented towards this world rather than the next while remaining non-committal with respect to literature's possible other-worldliness; finally, world literature foregrounds the world-creation power of literature, which is expressed in world creation myths but also whenever literature presents a world as world" (262). That is while John D. Pizer sees world literature as "uncanny," "sameness/otherness, identity/difference, and universal/particular dialectics" ("Teaching" 76). Further, Franco Moretti's 2000 "Conjectures on World Literature" is one of the new pioneering echoes of Goethe (and Max and Engels) in the English-speaking world. For Moretti "world literature is not an object, it's a problem, and a problem that asks for a new critical method" (55). Morretti negates the possibility of reading all works of world's literatures and proposes instead "distant reading" as a strategy to track "all of literary history ... [as] a long chain of related experiments" (62) and resorts to metaphors in explaining cultural and literary interrelationships. He describes the enterprise of world literature as a wave rather than a tree: "national literature, for people who see trees; world literature, for people who see waves" (68). Accordingly, he defines world literature as "a system of variations" which is "one, [although] not uniform" (64). His article provoked many reactions to which Moretti responded in his 2003 "More Conjectures" where he emphasized that "the proper object of historical disciplines are ... abstract models" (80). Moretti's holistic assumptions are similar to those of structuralism and Northrop Frye's thought in that they also try to account for the whole by resorting to abstract models through proposing an underlying structure or a coding system — *langue*, to use Ferdinand de Saussure's term — that can explain an array of cases. Thus, although world literature can imply the collective body of the world's literatures, the cross-cultural circulation of literary works is seminal to its definition. For example, at Simon Fraser University world literature programme the objective is defined as "World Literature focuses on the way writing travels beyond its context of origin and acquires a new life in other languages, nations and traditions" (<<http://www.fass.surrey.sfu.ca/wl1>>).

David Damrosch, one of the main proponents of the notion of world literature in the U.S., posits that world literature is a "mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike" (*What Is* 5) and proposes a "threefold definition focused on the world, the text, and the reader: 1) world literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures, 2) world

literature is writing that gains in translation, 3) world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (*What Is* 281). Accordingly, world literatures and national literatures are not opposed to each other as such and world literature does not suggest the end of national literatures; on the contrary, national literature is a strong presence in world literature. Further, Damrosch emphasizes that "world literature is multitemporal as well as multicultural" (*What Is* 16) and by this I assume he means that world literature should not be restricted to a limited time span because then many exciting possibilities would be ignored: "I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language ... All works cease to be the exclusive products of their original culture once they are translated; all become works that only 'began' in their original language" (*What Is* 4, 22). His emphasis on translation has been echoed by others like Puchner when he writes "world literature is not written, but made — made by a market-place in translation" (259). Similarly, Pizer believes that "world literature has existed as a heuristic mode of discourse among literary scholars and critics as a way of looking at how literature achieves international stature through modes of boundary crossing and circulation via translation, adaptation in diverse countries, and the reception of works by authors working in different tongues of each other's work" ("Teaching" 77).

However, to me Damrosch's definition does not universally signify a single, specific phenomenon — nor does Damrosch claim that it does (see "World Literature" 520-21). In other words, "world literature" might mean different things in different epochs and/or cultures and thus it is not safe to extend this definition to all cultures and literary traditions. Its reception even in its host culture that has actually originated it does not prove to be easy. On the one hand, the idea of world literature has been criticized for different reasons (see, e.g., Figueira; Huggan; Kadir; Leitch; Spivak; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári); on the other hand, its overt emphasis on linguistic boundaries and translation blurs its distinction with translation studies, which, as Susan Bassnett asserted was supposedly going to provide the main academic locus as the substitute of comparative literature: "Comparative literature as a discipline has had its day. Cross-cultural work in women's studies, in post-colonial theory, in cultural studies has changed the face of literary studies generally. We should look upon translation studies as the principle discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area" (161). Thus the emphasis on boundaries is similar to what is usually identified as one of the major causes of the so-called "crisis of comparative literature."

Speaking of the admission of works into world literature, Damrosch remarks that "A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin" (*What Is* 6). Of course he does not deny that "literature" is understood differently in discrepant cultures and/or epochs (see "What is 'Literature'?"). Yet, circulation of a work expands the domain of world literature. Specifying linguistic boundaries to define world literature could be problematic for two major reasons. First, sometimes other (relevant) boundaries — such as cultural, national/political/geographical, temporal — are crossed without crossing linguistic boundaries. Disparity between English literature and literature in English is a well-known example. Is Irish, Scottish, or Welsh literature, for instance, world literature in the British context? Can English literature be world literature in the U.S.? If yes, then why is English literature taught in the departments of national literature? What about the cultural products of US-American minorities and ethnicities who write in English despite their backgrounds? Interestingly enough, Damrosch, writing and working in the US-American context, insists that US-American literature can be world literature (see "How American").

Similar questions can be raised in other cultures, too. Persian, for example, has been spoken across different boundaries. There is literature written in Persian in various nation-states like Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan, and even India. Today, in fact, we witness the birth of Persianate studies as distinct from Persian studies and Iranian studies. Besides, Iran's miscellaneous boundaries have altered in time. Neither political nor cultural boundaries could be clearly defined especially before the Constitutional Revolution. Now, the question is two-folded: first, can any of these national literatures be regarded as world literature in others? And in which historical

period(s)? Moreover, these countries overlapped in other boundaries, besides that of linguistic, in the past. Afghanistan used to be a part of Iran, for instance. Does Afghan literature count as world literature in an Iranian context even with regard to the literature produced when they formed one united country? Can a part of Afghan literature count as world literature in Iran and a latter part not? And a similar story holds true with regard to European literatures before the Renaissance. In fact, I think that the problem with idea of "national literature" is two-fold: first, what counts as literature and, second, what is a nation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines nation as "A large aggregate of communities and individuals united by factors such as common descent, language, culture, history, or occupation of the same territory, so as to form a distinct people. Now also: such a people forming a political state; a political state" (1330). To me, this sounds a bit problematic because there are cases where such commonalities do not exist yet there is a nation, like Iran or the contemporary U.S. Also, there are cases where such commonalities do exist but there is no nation, like Kurds or some Arabs. In pre-modern societies, nation is not mainly defined with regard to political boundaries, but racial/parochial ones. Therefore, the distinction between nation and race/ethnicity seems to blur (also see Anderson; Bhabha; Fanon).

Linguistic boundaries are also sometimes crossed without crossing other (relevant) boundaries. Consider the condition of multilingual countries. Iran is one in which Persian, Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish, and Achūmī are among the languages spoken. Can any of them function as world literature in the others' contexts? The same story goes with countries like India and China. Furthermore, linguistic boundaries are not stable across the chronological axis within a specific literary tradition. Although *Beowulf* is identified as belonging to the English literary tradition, even readers competent in this tradition need to refer to the translated versions of the epic. Similarly, many Pahlavī ancient Persian texts are to be translated within their original literary tradition today, so texts like *Avesta* are undecipherable for contemporary Persians whether literary scholars or common readers. Further, the uneasy relationship between Arabic and Persian literatures is another case in point. Like Latin which used to be the language of arts and science during the Middle Ages in Europe, Arabic also came to dominate learning and even other walks of life in Iran after the Arab invasion of Iran which led to the downfall of the Sassanid dynasty (A.D. 226-652). From then on, Arabic and Persian intermingled inseparably and many Iranian authors wrote their books in Arabic: Ibn-i Sīnā, Ibn-i Rushd, AbūRayhān Bīrūnī, and Zakariya-yi Rāzī are just some examples and almost all others blended Arabic and Persian in their works. From the Arab invasion of Iran, which was the result of a series of attacks initiating in A.D. 633 culminating in Yazdgird III's (A.D. 632-652) flight when Arabic dominated as the official language, as well as the language of science and religion/theology until the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911), none of linguistic, political, geographical, and even cultural boundaries could clearly define world literature and national literature(s) in the Persian literary tradition. Recently, for instance, a controversy has broken out about Rumi. Turks' attempts to introduce him as a Turkish poet aroused strong sentiments in Iran where many insist that Rumi is indeed a Persian poet. He was actually born Jalāl al-dīn Muhammad in Balkh, Khurāsān. However, he resided most of his life and wrote his works in Konya, hence Rumi. He knew Persian and Arabic and wrote his works in Persian.

To recapitulate, even in a single national literary tradition various modes of reading, temporal and spatial "detached engagements," as well as translation are inevitable. It is true that "In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base, but Guillén's cautionary focus on actual readers makes good sense: a work only has an effective life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (Damrosch, *What Is* 4). However, literary systems are not static (on the macro-system see, e.g., Apter; Beecroft; Damrosch, *What Is*; Wallerstein; on the micro-system see, e.g., Even-Zohar; Schmidt; Tötösy de Zepetnek, "Systemic"; Villanueva). In fact, literary systems and cultures are dynamic and evolving, so a specific culture cannot be treated as if it is and remains to be stable and homogeneous entity in time. Reading and understanding any cultural product involve acts of cultural and sometimes even linguistic translation. Synchronically, therefore, such heterogeneity foregrounds a detached engagement across identity constituents and agencies such as race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, class, and nationality. And diachronically we often need to resort to different modes of reading within a national literary tradition to a

detached engagement with those texts which belong to the past. As Stephen Greenblatt states, new historicism provides such a communication with the dead ("Circulation" 495). Is thus new historicism — as "a mode of reading" (Damrosch, *What Is* 281), a set of reading "practice[s]" (Greenblatt, "Towards" 18) — world literature? In support of the idea, Bassnett wrote that "New historicism is ... a comparative methodology, only the process of comparison takes place across time boundaries rather than across geographic ones" (126) and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek wrote that "Greenblatt's and his colleagues' framework, New Historicism, comes, in part, remarkably close in concept, if not in methodological precision to the Systemic and Empirical approach [to the study of literature and culture]" (*Comparative Literature* 31). In consequence, defining the limits of world literature(s) proves to be challenging. Yet, this is consistent with the essence of world literatures: if one thing is for sure, it is that world literatures aim to go beyond limits and borders. The problem is that scholars — especially in Iran — are reluctant to accept let alone encourage such a view of fluidity and agency. Some even go as far as asserting that a similar resistance also exists against non-absolutist critical theories. For example, Husayn Pāyandih maintains that inclinations toward absolutism, either/or rather than both/and logic and "for-us-or-against-us" tendency are rooted in Iranian education, politics, society, culture, and mentality (9-11, 214-33). Probably this could explain the absence of comparative literature and world literature programs in secondary and higher education in Iran.

At the same time, open-endedness does not always work for practical educational ends. In his suggestions for teaching world literature in US-American universities, Pizer questions his students about the subject: "I ... ask students what criteria should govern the selection of imaginative texts for inclusion in a world literature syllabus, or even anthology, and in congruence with the views of most present-day world literature instructors, including myself, the responses indicate they feel geographic, linguistic, and temporal diversity are equally or more important than canonicity" ("Teaching" 78). To me, although arbitrary, it is a useful and practical definition of world literature as a "nonexhaustive taxonomy, provisional system making" to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion (6). Similarly, in contemporary Iran, a work has to cross at least two of the four boundaries — cultural, linguistic, temporal, and national/political/geographical — to count as world literature.

In conclusion, reading and teaching world literatures are vital in creating a planetary mutual understanding that can substitute opposition and domination with tolerance and peace. But as Tötösy de Zepetnek and Tutun Mukherjee remark in their "Introduction" to their *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies* "The negotiation of the network of relationships in the rapidly transforming 'glocal' milieu requires more than appropriate pedagogies: importantly, it requires a major shift in cultural and aesthetic paradigms and attitudes and a re-orientation towards being more inclusive globally" (vii). However, this very paradigm shift ought to occur in the realm of culture where education plays a significant role both in sustaining and reinforcing current "customary knowledge" — to borrow Belsey's term — and in resisting and subverting it while erecting a new vision and practice.

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