

## Comparative Literature in Iran: The Challenge of Interdisciplinarity

Perhaps it is not surprising that the rise and development of interdisciplinary studies often coincide with the historical periods when complicated social problems influencing different aspects of the lives of people arise. At such points, researchers have come to realize that complicated problems cannot be solved within the restricted walls of disciplinary divisions. One of the earliest academic experiences with interdisciplinary studies, Klein notes, can be traced back to 1920s when the Social Science Research Committee at the University of Chicago encouraged scholars to address social problems from an interdisciplinary perspective (1990: 24). In the 1960s and 1970s Universities such as Stanford, Harvard, and MIT became hotspots for interdisciplinary research. The social and political unrest during 60s and 70s also paved the way for radical educational reforms which explains for the rise of interdisciplinarity during that period (35). Literary studies were influenced by the interdisciplinary shift and it became clear to scholars that understanding literature without considering other artistic expressions surrounding it, or without observing the cultural womb out of which it has emerged can hardly answer comprehensive questions about human experiences in a complicated world.

Edward Said, a Palestinian American academic and literary critic who is often known as the founder of postcolonial studies, closely reads literature, art, history and critical theory to delineate the power dynamics involved and manifested in political, literary and artistic discourses. Homi Bhabha used psychoanalysis and deconstruction to show the internal fissures of the discourse of colonialism. Clifford Geerts creatively borrowed from sociology, anthropology, philosophy and semiotics to understand and complicate the cultural phenomenon. The rise of cultural studies, new historicism and postcolonial criticism in literature departments around the world during the 60s, 70s and 80s marked the interdisciplinary shift across humanities in Academia.

This introduction briefly hints at why the emergence of interdisciplinarity in the Iranian academia is now inevitable despite the serious challenges it faces. The Iranian society is dealing with very complicated social problems and our academia that has often been labelled as an ivory tower, snobbishly detached from the social reality, is now trying to address and confront its worldliness. In literature departments, this confrontation has led to a shift from text-oriented literary studies to context-orient-

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ed research questions in literary scholarship. Comparative literature that is gaining momentum in the Iranian academic journals --but still has a long way to go--can be considered a critical method that emphasizes understanding literature not in isolation, but as part of a larger network of international and intercultural relations and literary influences. Similarly, interdisciplinary research in literature involves integrating methods and theories from different academic disciplines to understand literature at the intersection of different artistic expressions and scientific discourses. Comparative literature with its classic definition and interdisciplinary literary studies both try to see literature as relational and as grounded in a large complicated world. Interdisciplinary studies and comparative literature both confront serious challenges in the Iranian academia.

A good way to understand the complexities of interdisciplinarity is to examine the etymology of the word. "Discipline," the core root of interdisciplinarity, refers to regulations that emphasize maintaining order. Moran's explanation of the term is particularly useful here: "it refers to a particular branch of learning or body of knowledge, and to the maintenance of order and control amongst subordinated groups such as soldiers, prison inmates or school pupils, often through the threat of physical or other forms of punishment. Interestingly, these two usages converged in some of the earlier uses of the term, from the first half of the fifteenth century onwards. 'Discipline' in this context suggested a particular kind of moral training aimed at teaching proper conduct, order and self-control. In fact, the very notion of the term as a recognized mode of learning implies the establishment of hierarchy and the operation of power" (2002: 2). The Farsi equivalent of "discipline" is "reshteh," which signifies a single thread. The term "bein-e-reshteh-i," which is equivalent to "interdisciplinary," embeds a metaphor rooted in textile imagery, evoking the weaving of vertical and horizontal threads. This metaphor is interesting because it suggests that one single thread cannot form a complete picture. The big picture only emerges when different threads with different directionalities are woven together. Whether we consider the English word or the Farsi equivalent, and whether we take interdisciplinarity to mean breaking down the hierarchies produced by single disciplines or weaving different threads together, there are obstacles blocking interdisciplinarity in Iranian academia that need to be addressed.

## 1. **The Reduced Mobility of the Iranian Academicians**

Although comparative literature—as an umbrella term that encompasses interdisciplinary studies-- has a global perspective and necessitates international contacts among scholars, Iranian academicians find it very challenging to have real interactions with their colleagues throughout the world. The scope of movement for us Ira-

nians on the globe is limited, and interaction through travel and visits is very difficult. Interaction can occur through publishing content on the internet in the hope that dialogue between different voices and disciplines will take place. Therefore, **the Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature, Arts and Humanities** has decided to publish its 7th issue in English. The long term project is to publish issues in other languages in the future so that the efforts and steps taken by Iranian academics to organize interdisciplinary and comparative studies can be visible and accessible, and international collaborations be facilitated.

## **2-Interdisciplinarity as the Ugly Duckling in the Iranian Academia**

Another challenge of interdisciplinarity in the Iranian academia is becoming familiar with the research methods of two or more different research fields. Interdisciplinary research should be a team work. It is necessary for the research team to work together, but team research often does not happen for multiple reasons, and one person alone cannot manage it. When universities offer interdisciplinary programs, they often end up treating them as a single discipline because interdisciplinary work becomes like an adopted child that no one takes responsibility for. Even the evaluation committees that grade research tend to devalue work published in interdisciplinary journals, suggesting it should be published in a journal dedicated to a specific discipline. Interdisciplinary research is misinterpreted as dabbling in everything without deeply analysing or examining any of them. This concern and insecurity about interdisciplinary journals stem from the fact that true interdisciplinary work, which can offer solutions for complex issues, has not yet fully materialized. Instead, interdisciplinary research often ends up as a mix of various fields, which leads to doubts about its credibility and depth.

## **3- Turning away from Polyphony**

Perhaps this distrust is rooted in a deeper mindset prevalent in Iranian academia. Polyphony -- the willingness to allow different voices to emerge and interact --is still an anomaly. Similarly, collaboration between different disciplines is often discouraged due to a scarcity of the necessary funds or the disbelief in collaboration itself. In a vicious circle, the academic hermitism plaguing the Iranian academia can be both a cause and an effect of the previous two factors.

Discussing the challenges and obstacles faced by interdisciplinarity in Iranian academia should not be misconstrued as a dismissal of the efforts made by dedicated academics who strive to push academic boundaries and create opportunities for interdisciplinarity, despite the unsympathetic and unwelcoming atmosphere. The **Journal of *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature, Arts and Humanities*** for instance, is a significant platform for interdisciplinary research across literature and the humanities. The international editorial board of the journal reflects its interdisciplinary scope. The expertise of the editorial board members include Arabic, Persian and English literatures, literary criticism, comparative literature, world literature, translation studies, film studies, postcolonial studies, middle eastern studies, cultural studies, Islamic studies, adaptation studies, etc. The diversity of the disciplines reflects the multidimensional perspective of the journal. A brief review of the essays published in this issue further highlights the interdisciplinary and comparative approach of the scholars and authors involved. The articles published in this issue cover British, American, Greek, African American, Nigerian, Polish, German, Arabic, and Bangladeshi literatures and have utilized a wide range of texts such as literature, linguistics, videogames, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and ecology to see and appreciate the complications of culture industry.

Ali Yaghoobi Choobari has utilized cognitive linguistics as an analytical tool to explore and explicate the socio-spatial metaphors in Foucault's philosophy. The interdisciplinarity of this essay stems from its effort to bridge the gap between Foucault's philosophical and historical ideas and the linguistic speculations on metaphor by Lakoff and Derrida. Naser Janani et al. have scrutinized the video game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* from a postcolonial perspective, borrowing the concept of orientalism from Edward Said to demonstrate how the culture industry operates within the medium of video games and how orientalist discourse continues to thrive in the 21st century. Behzad Pourgharib et al. have analyzed the manifestation of trauma in the narrative strategies of Toni Morrison's *Home*. This study reveals the collective and personal traumas of African Americans who have experienced racial discrimination and war. Sociology, psychology, and narratology are brought into dialogue in the discussion of this interdisciplinary paper.

Environmental crises in Bangladesh, including changes in the river ecosystem and their effects on people's lives, are embedded in the novels analyzed by Rama Islam. This paper focuses on three novels that reflect the victimization of Bengali fishers and farmers due to the loss of biodiversity in Bangladesh. The ecocritical perspective employed by Rama Islam highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the paper. Mahmood Heidari and Schmitz's article falls within the domain of comparative literature. The authors focus on an Arab philosopher, Ibn-al-'Arabī, and a German poet, Goethe, to compare the role of earthly love in human spiritual transcendence. Nahid Fakhr-shafaie has engaged with ecocriticism, focusing on animal studies. She com-

compares two novels by J.M. Coetzee, the South African novelist, and Olga Tokarczuk, the Polish writer, to illustrate how the female protagonists in these novels resist the binary oppositions embedded in the Western worldview regarding animals. Mohammad Ghaffary has employed contrapuntal reading, a deconstructive strategy adapted by Edward Said, to study *The Odyssey*. He argues that the work has played a significant role in shaping Western subjectivity, both for the ancient Greeks and modern Western people. This paper is comparative in that it examines how a literary work influences cultural identity across different periods and cultures.

Maryam Soltan Beyad et al. have explored the concept of compatibilism in Hume's philosophy and Alexander Pope's poems. Through a close reading of Hume's philosophical drafts and Pope's "Essay on Man", the authors argue that Hume's ideas found an echo in Pope's verse essays. This echo, they suggest, could be either the direct influence of Hume on Pope or the indirect influence of the 18th-century worldview on both figures. The main argument of the paper lies at the intersection of literature and philosophy, making it interdisciplinary; it also examines the influence of a philosopher on a poet, thus qualifying as comparative research.

Abdolmohammad Movahhed et al. have explicated three plays by Marcus Gardley—*And Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*, *The House That Will Not Stand*, and *A Wolf in Snake Skin Shoes*—to analyze the socio-political and cultural role of the church and religiosity in the identity formation of African American people. The paper presents a nuanced view of the church's role in these plays, asserting that religiosity can be positive, negative, or ambivalent in the lives of African American characters. This research is interdisciplinary, as it examines the sociological dimensions of religion and its impact on the subaltern identity of African Americans in the three plays.

Narges Raufzadeh et al. have employed the concept of ecotherapy to assess the mental states of the main characters in *Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward. They argue that alienation from nature has traumatized humanity in general, and that biophilia and eco-phobia have positively or negatively influenced the mental states of the novel's characters. This research is interdisciplinary, involving the interaction between ecology, psychology, and literature.

Golbarg Darvishian and Javad Yaghoobi Derabi explore the effects of capitalism and neoliberalism on human identity. They offer a close reading of *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, a short story collection by American writer David Foster Wallace, through the lens of Fredric Jameson's Marxist theories. In this interdisciplinary article, which lies at the crossroads of literature, sociology, and psychology, the authors discuss the ideology-driven masses who fail to communicate meaningfully as individuals.

Sajjad Gheytasi and Ali Salami have utilized the postcolonial theories of Ortiz and Bhabha to discuss the diasporic identity of Nigerian emigrants in *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The authors draw attention to the lingering effects of colonial discourse, showing how the world often fails to appreciate the personal histories of Nigerian emigrants. The critique of otherness, exile, and emigration, along with an examination of sociology, literature, and identity politics, forms the main argument of this interdisciplinary paper.

We have introduced samples of interdisciplinary and comparative research in English and plan to include more issues in other languages in the future. We know it is not without flaws, but this was the first English issue of the **Journal of *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature, Arts and Humanities*** and we've only taken the initial step. We hope to improve the quality of our interdisciplinary research in the future. And we hope that our efforts to make our voices heard and establish connections with our international colleagues demonstrate our willingness to engage with the global community. We invite collaboration, critique, and dialogue with academics from different parts of the world.

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