

DOES PERSIAN/ARABIAN-GULF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE EXIST? AN EXPLORATION OF THE PRACTICES OF COMPARATISTS IN THE GULF COUNCIL COUNTRIES

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RESUMO: Este artigo explora as práticas de comparatistas literários nos países abrangidos pelo Conselho de Cooperação dos Estados Árabes do Golfo. Será feito um panorama histórico para contrastar o início da Literatura Comparada na região árabe, especialmente no Egito e no Levante, com o começo dela na região do Golfo, em particular. Então, a produção ímpar das revistas e dos periódicos literários e culturais sediados no Golfo, que nem sempre são dirigidos por professores universitários e acadêmicos, desperta especial interesse também. O artigo também discute a prática de Literatura Comparada nas universidades do Golfo, com ênfase especial nos cursos de Literatura Comparada, oferecidos principalmente por departamentos de língua e literatura em inglês e árabe, tanto em nível de graduação quanto de pós-graduação.

PALAVRAS CHAVES: Golfo Persa/Árabe; Jornalismo Cultural; Literatura Comparada e Crítica Literária; Literatura Comparada e Pedagogia

ABSTRACT: This article explores the practices of literary comparatists in the Gulf Council Countries (GCC's). A historical survey is showcased to contrast the beginnings of comparative literature in the Arab region, remarkably in Egypt and the Levant with beginnings in the Gulf region in particular. Then, the unique output of the Gulf-based literary and cultural journals and magazines, which are not always run by university professors and academics, is of special interest as well. It also discusses the comparative literature practice in the Gulf universities, with special emphasis on the comparative literature courses, offered mainly by the departments of English and Arabic language and literature on both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

KEY WORDS: Persian/Arabian Gulf; Cultural Journalism, Comparative Literature and Literary Criticism; Comparative Literature and Pedagogy

Discreet, Budding Beginnings?

It looks like a fairly easy task to track the genesis of 'Comparative Literature,' as an independent discipline of knowledge, in the Arab world in general. By the 'Arab World' I mean this part of the world where the Arabic language (with its myriad of dialects, variants and levels

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of usage) is widely spoken as the mother tongue of the populations of this region. More specifically, this world includes, according to many people, the Arabic Peninsula, Mesopotamia, the Levant, Egypt, and the Greater Maghreb. It is not at all effortless, however, to narrow down any scholarly inquiry to only one part of this world like, say, the Arabic Peninsula or the Levant, given the intricate and dynamic interconnections between those smaller regions within the Arab world at large on the one hand, and the peculiarities that are distinctive to each region on the other.

The scope of this article shall be limited to pursuing the practices of comparative literature professionals in the Gulf Council Countries (GCC's). To explain, GCC is a political term, which refers to the Arab countries overlooking the Persian/Arabian Gulf, i.e. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Despite the fact that Yemen is located in the southwestern corner of the Arabic Peninsula, and Iraq also overlooks the Persian Gulf (with quite a short coastline), the current study will exclude the practices of their respective comparatists. The reason of such limitation is not to show interest in GCC as a geopolitical term, but to focus on those six countries that are homogenous, not only geographically, but also culturally, or more precisely 'sub-culturally,' as it is customary that the nationals of the GC countries share more or less one so-called '*Khaleeji*¹' (sub)culture, so to speak, with such culture being an affine of the larger Arabic culture.

Given that comparative literature practices are essentially one facet of the practices within a given culture; it should be expected, as a point of departure, to assume that the practices of comparatists in the Gulf region are bound by the very affinity such region has with the Arab world at large on the one hand, as well as, on the other hand, its disparity as a distinct region that has its own subtly dissimilar ideas, norms and practices, culturally speaking. More specifically, a discussion of the beginning of comparative literature practice in the Arab world in general is not irrelevant at all in a historical survey of comparatist practice in the GCC's. It is a fact that GCC academics and intellectuals are not, and cannot, be detached from the wide-ranging Arabic cultural and academic scene. It is quite a habitual practice that, for example, Egyptian, Syrian, or Moroccan publishers, authors and intellectuals are active participants and contributors to the proceedings of book exhibitions and other major cultural events in the cities of Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait and Doha. More interestingly, it is also common that, say, Palestinian, Egyptian, or Algerian academics choose to move to GCC-based universities. Not only this, but it is not uncommon to find celebrated figures among those 'expatriate' academics, who made a noticeable difference in their new positions in the departments of Comparative Literature in the various GCC universities, and/or assumed high-rank editorial positions in Gulf-based literary journals and magazines.

That the earliest, illustrious contribution to the discipline of comparative literature by an Arab scholar, namely Ruhi al-Khalidi's book *Tarikh 'ilm al-adab 'ind al-ifranj wal-'arab wa-Victor Hugo* (The History of the Discipline of Literature among Westerners and Arabs and Victor

¹ The word '*Khaleeji*' is an Arabic word which is literally translated as "of, or related to the [Persian/Arabian] Gulf." As mentioned above, the word *Khaleeji* does refer to the lifestyle, customs, traditions, norms, and practices of the people of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Oman. Although Yemen is located in the Arabian Peninsula and Iraq shares a coast on the Persian Gulf, but both Iraqi and Yemeni cultures and ways of life in general are seldom, if any, referred to as *khaleeji*.

Hugo),” (GHAZOUL, 2006. p. 113) which was published in Cairo by Dar Al-Hilal in 1904, was not an incident that is irrelevant or inconsequential to subsequent Persian/Arabian Gulf students and scholars of comparative literature. For them, as well as for the rest of the Arab-speaking academics, intellectuals and students, Ruhi al-Khalidi (1864-1913) is still, for many, “the first predecessor of applied comparative Arabic literature.” (SABERI, Summer 1388 A.H., p. 196) Other commentators argue also that the publication of the first Arabic translation of the *Iliad* by Sulayman al-Bustani (1856-1925), along with an extensive and critical introduction, may be regarded by many as “the first serious attempt in comparative literature vis-à-vis Arabic literature,” (p. 193) coincidentally also in 1904.

The details of the two above-mentioned books and their authors are significant indicators of how comparative literature in the Arab world developed and functioned. Both al-Khalidi and al-Bustani were *de facto* Ottoman citizens, who originated in the Levant, i.e. Palestine and Lebanon respectively. That the two books were published by the same publisher in Cairo is yet another noteworthy indicator. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century and turn of the twentieth century, it was not infrequent that Levantine intellectuals, journalists and litterateurs chose to move and settle mainly in Cairo and conduct their literary, journalistic and cultural activities there. Such Cairo-based journals, magazines and books were widely circulated throughout the Arab region to a diverse Arab readership.

Moreover, Arab early interest in (romantic) French and (classical) ancient Greek literatures, from a comparative lens, should not be left without second thoughts. The very centrality of European literatures dating to both the long Nineteenth Century and the Antiquity in the earliest Arab comparative literary endeavors invokes a parallel, centralized presence of the Arab *Nahḍah*, with its distinctive ideology, narratives and methodologies, underlying the Arab comparative literary studies since their inception. From this, it could be contended that not only “the precursors of the Arab *Nahḍah* (Renaissance) were the heralds of the earliest beginnings of comparative literature in the Arab world,” but also that “the *Nahḍah*-related philosophy of our men of letters and critics of this and subsequent eras will have a well-defined impact upon navigating (Arab) comparative literary studies towards contributing to a literary blossoming (i.e. renaissance) through accessibility to other literatures.” (GHILAN, H. M., January – March 2006. p. 117) Such an attitude towards Arabic literary studies proliferated in “Egypt in the early nineteenth century by Rifa’ah al-Tahtawi (1801-1873), as it evidently appeared in al-Tahtawi’s investigation of some linguistic and literary issues.” (AMER, September 1983, p. 13)

What is common between those three luminaries (Ahmad Faris Shidyaq, Najib Haddad and Adib Ishaq) is not only that they laid the foundation for Arabic comparative studies, but also that they departed from an acute Arabo-centrist recognition, as it were, of Arabic literature, especially verse, vis-à-vis what is dubbed as ‘foreign’ verse or literatures in general. In his article “*Tarikh ‘ilm al-adab*” (“The History of the Discipline of Literature,”) Ruhi al-Khalidi argued in a virtual review of his own book that the author of the book (meaning himself) had embraced the method of “comparison between Arabic and foreign literatures and explication of what the foreigners borrowed from our literary compositions and styles; a method which was unprecedented.” (AL-MAQDISI, March 1912, p. 376) In this book, al-Khalidi brought in “social and historical premises in the discipline of literature among the foreigners [i.e. Europeans], compared to what the Arabs have during their Golden Ages reaching their Middle Ages, as well as what the foreigners

borrowed from them [i.e. the Arabs] in literature and verse in their latest (literary) renaissance, particularly by Victor Hugo.” (SHAMNAD, 2014, p. 3-4)

Moreover, in the critical, well-researched introduction to his translation of the *Iliad*, Sulayman al-Bustani “made intrepid comparisons between the (ancient) Greek epic and Arabic narrative verse to maintain that short Arabic epics do exist, yet they are dissimilar to the long, foreign epics.” (SHAMNAD, p. 3) In the case of al-Tahtawi, although he might not be regarded as a predecessor of Arabic applied comparative literary studies in the same fashion as al-Khalidi or al-Bustani, he was likewise interested in “literary phenomena in Arabic and French literatures.” (AMER, p. 14) However, al-Tahtawi was not concerned “via those literary and linguistic comparisons with the examination of literary and linguistic phenomena *per se*, but he aimed to explore the causes of ‘real civilization’ in the age in which he lived” (p. 15). One must note that the thrust that spurred al-Tahtawi to come up with his early, quasi-comparative literary remarks was *Nahḍah*-related at heart.

Blossoming Prospects: From the Cultural to the Academic

The first half of the twentieth century witnessed a shift in comparative literature in Arabic. One imperative note to be illuminated here is that the interwar period in the Arab world, more specifically in Egypt and the Levant, was a time when the word ‘comparative’ had been more used by Egyptian and Lebanese intellectuals and men of letters. It has become familiar that notable literary figures like the poet laureate Ahmad Shawqi (1869-1932), whose verse play *Masra’ Cleopatra* (*The Death of Cleopatra*) is a case of “*influence á rebours*, which is one of the topics in comparative literature,” where “an author [like Shawqi] resists the influence of another author in the literature of another nation [William Shakespeare in this case], resulting in an impact in the former’s production.” (SABERI, p. 195, words in square brackets by researcher) A similar impact of a Shakespearean literary work is also evident in what the Lebanese poet Khalil Mutran (1872-1949) did in his introduction of his Arabic translation of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, where he asserted that “Shakespeare is close to the Arab taste.” (SHAMNAD, p. 4)

It is also noteworthy that cultural magazines such as the Cairo-based *al-Risalah* and *al-Muqtataf* were venues for authors, who wrote, among many things, essays in a comparative vein, principally oriented to the general, non-specialized reader. It is likewise marked that during the sprouting and onset stages of comparative literature in the Arab world that those comparative-literature-related compositions were yet far from being professionally and rigorously academic. One poet and translator like Fakhri Abu al-Sa’ud (1910-1940) published more than one short essay of comparative importance in *al-Risalah* magazine. It appears that Abu al-Sa’ud’s impetus to write and publish such short studies directed to the general reader was no different than that of his contemporaries and predecessors. In all cases, writing with the aim of ‘educating the people’ was in the mind of many authors of the time. It is also easy to discern the presence of the Arab *Nahḍah*

in the brief studies published by Abu al-Sa'ud² and others, where there have always been attempts to establish the superiority of the Arabic literature vis-à-vis the literatures of the 'civilized foreigners,' and to reiterate that one of the routes to be taken to realize, more accurately, for some 'to restore' the Arab *Nahḍah*, is to get exposed to the literatures of other countries.

Yet, in Arabic academia, the first appearance of comparative literature was "in Dar al-'Ulum in Cairo in 1938; however, the term disappeared only to return in the late 1940s in a series of textbooks [...] the first of which was published in Cairo in 1948 with the title 'Of Comparative Literature' by [the Lebanese] Najib al-'Aqqi." (SHAMNAD, p. 5) Professionally and academically alike, there is consensus that the Egyptian university professor Muhammad Ghunaymi Hilal (1917-1968) is "the first professional – in every sense of the word – in [Arabic] comparative studies, unlike his predecessors who used to rely on their unspecific cultural credit, instead of relying on their specialized one." (ALLOUSH, 1987, p. 211) In addition to this, the very publishing of his acclaimed book *Al-Adab al-Muqaran (Comparative Literature)* in Cairo in 1953 "is considered the beginning of methodological research in the field in Arabic literature." (ABOU DAQQA, January 2008, p. 99) Trained in the Sorbonne where he earned his Doctorat d'État, Hilal was dedicated to the French school in the discipline of comparative literature, and earnest in his propagation of the historical method in the field. Unlike other Arab comparatists, Hilal was truly a "role model that was followed by his successors in their teaching of and research on comparative material." (ALLOUSH, p. 212) It is claimed, and rightly so, that since the 1950s, subsequent research related to comparative literature in the major Arab universities of the time was heavily dependent on the contributions and theses of Hilal in Arab comparative literary studies.

Despite the fact that Hilal himself marked a watershed between two distinct stages in the development of comparative literature as a discipline in the Arab world, he also continued more or less the broader ideological line of the preceding, cultural stage. Such a broad ideology took the form of a rather chauvinistic (Arab) nationalism; "a disposition which converges with *nahḍawi* spheres in modern Arab literature." (p. 207) His characteristic contribution, however, was in his connection between "renaissances," "national literature," and "world literatures" as it is quite unmistakably evident in the following declaration:

Each literature has its own renaissances during which it contributed to the advancement of world literatures, and it found its way through an assortment of influences, whereby the genius and intellectual superiority of its people stand out; their manifestation in comparative studies is the best way to cultivate nationalistic sentiments. (HILAL, 1992, p. 3)

² See Abu al-Sa'ud, Fakhri. "al-adab al-Arabi wa al-adab al-gharbi." *Al-Risalah* 41 (16 April 1934): pp. 617-18; "al-athar al-Yunani fi al-adab al-Arabi." *Al-Risalah* 49 (11 June 1934): pp. 968-69; and "Zhawahir mutamathila fi tarikh al-adabain al-Arabi wa al-Englizi." *Al-Risalah* 80 (14 January 1935): pp. 55-56.

Such “nationalistic sentiments” brought about by “comparative studies” were also “cultivated” in the ensuing decades in the arid lands of the Arabian Gulf region. Compared to the much older ‘nation-states’ in the Arab Middle East like Egypt, Iraq or Morocco, the Gulf Council countries are comparatively newer nation-states. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, which was founded as a modern state by King Abdulaziz Al Saud in 1932, the other Gulf countries earned their independence when the British decided to end their protectorate in the region, with Kuwait becoming a sovereign state in 1961, followed by what has come to be recognized as the states of Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the Trucial States (the present United Arab Emirates) in 1971. As mentioned before, prior to the early 1960s, Persian/Arabian Gulf students used to enroll themselves in the already-established universities of the time in Cairo, Baghdad or Damascus (or elsewhere). Given the above context, there are two big questions to be raised: Is the development pattern of Arab comparative literature from the cultural to the academic applicable to the Persian/Arabian Gulf region as well? And are the inception and growth of the Gulf comparative literary studies associated with the so-called *nahḍawi* and/or nationalistic ideology and enterprise?

Historically, the emergence and flourishing of (literary) journalism preceded the onset of national university education institutions in the Gulf region, and in the neighboring Levant and Egypt (and most probably elsewhere in other parts of the Arab world). To illustrate, the first cultural magazine in the Gulf is the *Mejallat al-Kuwait* (Kuwait magazine), the first issue of which appeared in print in 1928 by Abdul Aziz Rasheed, who is dubbed as “the father of the Kuwait press.” (MANSFIELD, 1990, p 109) No different than both his predecessors and contemporaries in Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq, Rasheed “saw the press as an instrument of education.” (p 109) Yet, Kuwait University (KU), Kuwait’s national university, was established in 1966, five years after Kuwait’s declared independence in 1961. Likewise, the Saudi writer “‘Abdul-Quddus al-Anṣārī founded the monthly literary magazine *al-Manhal*” (SHAMIKH, 1984, p. 76) in 1937, as the first literary magazine in Saudi Arabia. However, it took the then nascent kingdom twenty years to build the country’s first national university, namely, King Saud University in 1957. The same sequence applies naturally to the rest of the Gulf States. That those early Gulf literary and cultural magazines and their ilk ever published literature of any comparative significance is highly uncertain. Still, it is most probable that they published essays directed for the most part towards the general, local reader.

To further the discussion, the birth and rise of comparative literature as a term in the Gulf, in both the cultural and academic arenas, fall under Egyptian (as well as partly Levantine and even Iraqi) tutelage. As for schools and universities, “[t]he Egyptian syllabus was first put into practice in the early 1940s in Bahrain and Kuwait.” (ANSARI, 1998, p. 49) In a state of affairs where the cultural and academic seem to blur, what seemed to some as newly designated political borders appear not to impede the migration of Egyptians and other Arabs to work in Gulf magazines and universities, as well as Gulf nationals to travel to learn in Egyptian and other Arab universities, in addition to contributing to non-Gulf cultural and literary venues. For both the cultural and academic, whether in Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq or the Gulf, “in times of confrontation with the Western colonialism [...] as well as of the industrial ‘modernization’ and its subsequent social changes,” Marie-Thérèse Abdelmessih argues, “the chauvinistic, nationalistic trend rises [...] which has an impact on critical [and comparative] studies; by means of the upsurge of a trend that approaches other literatures from a nationalistic perspective in view of emphasizing the superiority of Arabic

literature related to the other (literatures).” (ABDELMESSIH, January 2013 p. 103) It is no surprise, then, that not only the Egyptian veteran professor Hilal would accentuate the need for comparative literary practice because it “brings to light the sources of artistic and intellectual trends vis-à-vis the national literature,” (HILAL, 1992, p. 17). The Saudi pioneer writer and editor ‘Abdul-Quddus al-Ansari would likewise make it clear that his magazine was “a means to ‘defend Arabism and Islam’ against ‘the Westernization of everything.’” (DETERMANN, 2014, p. 70)

Like its precedent Dar al-‘Ulum in Cairo, the Arabic Language department in Kuwait University was the first department to teach comparative literature as an academic course in the Gulf in 1975. The course was taught by the celebrated Iraqi poet and professor Nazik Al-Malaika (1923-2007) and the Egyptian scholar Ibrahim ‘Abd Al-Rahman Muhammad³, both of whom were “specialized in comparative literature. [The department] struck a balance between the French and American schools. However, it seemed that comparisons are with emphasis on Anglo-American literature.” (AL-MANASRA, March 1986, p. 22) The second Gulf university to designate comparative literature as a course is King Saud University in 1978, when the Egyptian critic, poet and university professor Ahmad Kamal Zaki (1927-2008) was assigned to “create a curriculum for the comparative literature course as a ‘modern criticism’ course, and not as a branch of Literary History, as presumed by the French school.” (p. 20) Like its neighboring department in Kuwait, the department in Riyadh followed “the American method, but inlaid with the German school.”⁴ (p. 22)

In addition, the demarcation line seems also to diminish between the cultural and the academic when it comes to the practice of comparative literature in Bahrain. In a way, this may account for Bahrain’s relative primacy in the publication of cultural and literary magazines, compared to its perceived belatedness in introducing comparative literature in academia.⁵ Since the early 1940s until the mid-1950s, Bahrain’s two cultural magazines were *Jaridat al-Bahrain* (Bahrain Journal) and *Sawt al-Bahrain* (Voice of Bahrain) respectively. Both were interested in publishing material for fans of literature, but the most striking example of comparative appeal is the discussion of “[Ebrahim] Al-‘Arrayedh’s experience of translating *Rubaiyat Al-Khayyam* [...] when he was keen [to work on] comparative literature.” (SARHAN, 2006, p. 247) One prime example of cultural comparative literary endeavors is related to the work of the Bahraini critic and writer Mohamed ‘Ali Al-Khozai. He shows special interest in the origins of Arab theater. (p. 270)

³ Nazik Al-Malaika graduated from the College of Arts in Baghdad University, and completed a master’s degree in comparative literature at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Ibrahim ‘Abd A-Rahman Muhammad, on the other hand, published a number of publications related to comparative literature, notably his book *Al-Adab Al-Muqaran bayna al-Nazhariyah wa al-Tatbiq* (Cairo: 1976).

⁴ For an illustration of the German school component, interested in the ethnographic and historical contexts that showcase the links of literature to folklore and mythology, in the work of Ahmad Kamal Zaki, see *Al-Asatir*. (Cairo: Dar Al-Katib Al-Arabi Lil-Tiba’ah wa al-Nashr, 1967).

⁵ Bahrain followed Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and even Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in opening its national university, as “Qatar University [opened] in 1976/77 and the United Arab Emirates University in 1977/78 and lately the University College of Bahrain in 1978/79.” (Al-Misnad, 1985, p. 211)

It is also noteworthy that the comparative literature luminaries in Bahrain combine literary creativity with academic professionalism, such as Munira Al-Fadhel⁶ and Hasan Marhamah⁷, both of who are professors of comparative literature at the University of Bahrain.

According to the official website of the University of Bahrain, “the Department of English Language and Literature” is said to be “one of the oldest departments in the University of Bahrain, since it was established officially in 1986.” (About the Department, 2009) Together with its state of incipency, compared to the other departments of languages (and literature) in other Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the Department of English and Literature, as well as the Department of Arabic Language and Literature, offer one comparative literature course only to their respective undergraduate students. In both departments, comparative literature is offered as an advanced course (ENGLISH 438 and ARABIC 448), where students are acquainted with the methods and theories of comparative literature, especially the French and the American schools, with emphasis on Arabic and English literatures.

The status of comparative literature in Qatar is not dissimilar to that in Bahrain, or even the more pioneering Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. Initiated in November 1969, Qatar’s first cultural and literary magazine *Al-Doha* was predominantly run by Egyptian and Arab writers, with the literary critic Raja’ al-Naqqash (1934-2008) becoming its editor-in-chief in 1979. A quick review of *Al-Doha*’s early issues reveals little interest in topics of a comparative perspective; they only introduced the reader with a few short pieces, which are either reviews of ‘foreign’ literatures or simply essays to accentuate the Arab (chiefly literary) presence in the European or even the American cultural milieus.⁸ Launched in 1980, Qatar’s second, less prominent magazine *Al-Ummah* (The Nation) has been similarly interested in topics of general interest, like Islamic literature.

As for Qatari academia, the practice of comparative literature has proven to be no better than it is in the adjacent Gulf states. In Qatar University’s College of Arts and Sciences, comparative literature is only offered as a concentration course in both the Arabic and English Departments. Moreover, the comparative literature course is an optional course for non-specialized students. In both departments, comparative literature is evidently an upper-division course (ARAB 483 and ENGL 302 respectively). In ENGL 302, students are introduced to the theory and practice

⁶ Munira Al-Fadhel is a Bahraini writer and academic. She is currently teaching in the University of Bahrain. She is also the co-editor of the anthology of the Bahraini contemporary poetry in English, *Pearl, Dreams of Shell*. (Englewood, CO: Howling Dog Press, 2007). She has also published two books, *Al-Remora*, a collection of short stories, and a novella titled *The Voice: The Frailty of Echo*.

⁷ Hasan Marhamah is a Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Bahrain. He is also the author of *Voices: An Annotated Anthology of Contemporary Poetry* (2009) and *Voices II: Contemporary Bahraini Short Stories* (2014).

⁸ See Al-Miri, William. “Al-Sahafah al-Arabiyyah fi Amerika.” *Al-Doha* 6 (1 June 1977): pp. 129-131; Ussairan, Issam. “Al-Funoun al-sha’biyyah al-Arabiyyah fi masrahiyyah Fransiyah.” *Al-Doha* 3 (1 March 1977): pp. 138-140; Al-Arna’oat, ‘Abd al-Latif. “Sab’at udaba’ min Afriqya.” Rev. *Al-Doha* 9 (1 September 1977): pp. 131-134; and ‘Attia, Na’eem. “Samarakis wa riwayatuhu ‘Al-Khata’.” *Al-Doha* 6 (1 June 1977): pp. 133-136.

in comparative literature in order to “transfer the skills they learnt in English and American literature to other literatures, and particularly their own literature, Arabic,” (Courses, 2016) whereas in ARAB 483, “students use the knowledge gained in their Arabic literature classes, and compare the texts of Arabic literature with other Western literature (English, French or Persian), so they become aware of how genres migrate [etc.]” (Research papers, presentations and tests, etc., 2016)

It seems that the further one goes to the southern corner of the Arabian/Persian Gulf region, i.e. to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman, the newer the practice of comparative literature becomes. Of the culture-oriented magazines in the UAE, the earliest are *Ar-Rafid* (The Tributary), which started as “a quarterly in November 1993, then became bi-monthly in 2000, and it is interested in biographies, literature and the arts.” (FATHI, August 2015, p. 4) In the same year of 1993, another cultural and literary magazine started, namely, *Afaq Al-Thaqafah wa Al-Turath* (Horizons of Culture and Heritage), which, as the name suggests, is more concerned with issues related to Arabic and Islamic heritage, with non-Arabic language and literature most probably approached from a more conventional angle.⁹

A similar belatedness is also characteristic of UAE institutions of university education, and subsequently of the language and literature departments that are expected to offer comparative literature courses to undergraduate (and graduate) students. Again, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences in the oldest Emirati university, i.e. the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) at Al-Ain (also UAE’s flagship university), offers comparative literature as a course in the Arabic Language and Literature Program only. Like that of Qatar University, the course (ARB450) is a concentration, higher-division course that is mandatory for the students who major in literature. As in the other GCC universities, the comparative literature course offered by the Arabic Literature Program “looks at the rich interactions between and among Arabic literatures and English-language literatures.” (Comparative Literature [ARB450], 2016).

The cultural and academic milieu vis-à-vis the status of comparative literature practitioners in the neighboring Oman is quite similar to that in the United Arab Emirates. Despite the fact that Oman might claim, unlike its other Gulf sister countries, a state of ‘nationhood’ before the oil surge in the thirties of the twentieth century, modern Oman did not take shape except when Sultan Qaboos Bin Said rose to power (1970 - present). Oman’s flagship university is Sultan Qaboos University. Opening in 1986, it is regarded as the newest university among all GCC universities. As in Qatar University (QU) and United Arab Emirates University (UAEU), the only offered comparative literature course (ARABIC 4351) is a mandatory course for the students who major in the Arabic Literature Program. One noteworthy fact about departments of languages in the more recently established GCC universities is that they are more dependent, like their predecessors in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, on expatriate faculty, which certainly has a profound, drastically different impact on learning, if compared with the essentially Arabist, Egypt-patronized and

⁹ For a sample of such publications, see the review published by Dr. Ghazi Mukhtar Tulaimat of the German orientalist’s book *Arabiya* by Johann Fück. (*Afaq Al-Thaqafah wa Al-Turath* 3, 1 December 1993), and Khalaf, Saher. “Al-udaba’ al-Arab al-natiqun bi al-Faransiyah fi Lubnan.” *Afaq Al-Thaqafah wa Al-Turath* 5 (1 July 1994): pp. 32-39.

Nahḍah-constrained cultural journalism and academia of the Gulf from the mid-fifties to the late nineties. The Egyptian and Arab contributions were still quite substantial in the cultural arena, however, as any reader of *Nizwa*, Oman's best known cultural magazine would discern.

Giants in the Wilderness: The Current Scene

To approach the status of comparative literature as practiced by critics, cultural journalists and academics in the Persian/Arabian Gulf in the late 1990s and early 2000s to the present, the current scene looks like a land of giants and dwarfs. Since the initiation of comparative literature as an independent discipline in the early 1950s in Egypt and then elsewhere in the Arab world, there seemed to be a more or less solid, institutionalized development of the discipline in Arab cultural and academic circles. In the Gulf States, however, the situation was a bit different. The cultural and academic venues, where comparative literature would be practiced, were largely dependent on non-Gulf professionals. However, one of the Gulf nationals who proves to be an exceptional giant in the field is the eminent Saudi professor Saad AlBazei (b. 1953). Trained in both King Saud University and Purdue University, AlBazei is an intellectual who has published extensively on Arabic literature and comparative literary studies. He produced articles of comparative substance such as "Elegies Within Culture: Auden and Abu Risha," (*Proceedings of the conference: Comparative Literature in the Arab World, Cairo University, 20-22 December 1995*); "The Revulsion against Islam: Romanticist Critics and the East," (*Abhath Al-Yarmouk Journal*, Jordan, 1997).

Another Saudi national with an outstanding status is Professor Moneera Al-Ghadeer. Like her compatriot, she earned her PhD in comparative literature from a US university (University of California, Berkeley). Her research interests are Arabic, African-American and Francophone literatures, feminist philosophy, postcolonial studies and translation theory. She published a book in English with the title *Desert Voices: Bedouin Women's Poetry in Saudi Arabia* (I. B. Tauris/American University in Cairo Press, 2009). She was the Chair of the Department of English Literature and Linguistics in Qatar University (2008-2012), as well as the Director of Postgraduate Studies and Research in the Translation and Interpreting Institute at Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar (2012-2014).

The Egyptian Marie-Thérèse Abdelmessih is another colossal figure in comparative literature in Egypt and the Gulf region. With academic and professional training in Cairo University, Complutense University of Madrid, and the University of Essex, Professor Abdelmessih is now a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Kuwait University and the Director of the MA Program in Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies in Kuwait University (2007- Present). She published books which focused on the visual and verbal cultural representations as well as on a transcultural reading of literature. Like her books, her articles focus on the transcultural and transnational in approaching literature.

Conclusion

To answer the question related to the scope of the operations and impact of comparative literature in the Arabian/Persian Gulf cultural and academic milieus is not an easy task. Comparative literature was first enthusiastically yet discreetly practiced in the Gulf countries by temporarily immigrant Egyptian writers and academics, then by Gulf competent nationals along with a plethora of professionals and practitioners 'from the east and west,' as literally articulated on the official website of the University of Bahrain. The challenges that still stand in the way of a better practice of comparative literature in the Arab world in its entirety are no different than those that are peculiar to the Gulf region. I believe the departments of Languages and Literature in the Gulf Council countries have quite sizeable potential, given the political geostrategic location of the region, and the ample financial and material resources that could be better put into the service of extending the functionality and influence of comparative literature in the cultural and academic lives of people in the Gulf region and in the Arab world at large.

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