

## **A Call for Comparative Approach to Arabic Literature**

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### **Abstract**

Arabic literature, produced by native Arabs in their homelands and in their chosen or enforced exiles all over the world, as well as by non-Arabs who have adopted Arabic as a medium of their creative writings, is the outcome of an all-embracing interaction between its centuries-long tradition and the various cultural and literary traditions of the rest of the world. Yet this extensive, rich and diverse experience of cross-cultural encounters is largely neglected by comparatists from both East and West. As leading post-colonial scholars and critics are now challenging Western centrism, there is a growing feeling amongst Arab comparatists that the comparative study of their literature deserves reconsideration for what it brings to our appreciation of a fascinating chapter in the history of interactions amongst world literatures. This paper examines the potential contribution that the study of Arabic literature comparatively can make to the theories of comparative literature, and demonstrates this through an exciting example of its encounter with other literatures.

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The former President of **The American Comparative Literature Association (2009-2011)**, and the author of the **Association's Report on The State of the Discipline**, 2004, which appeared later in a book-form, edited and introduced by him under the title: *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (2006), Professor Haun Saussy writes in his contribution to *The Blackwell's Companion to Comparative Literature*, entitled 'Comparison, World Literature, and the Common Denominator':

I think the job of the comparatist is to invent new relations among literary works (and relations with things that have not been previously classes among literary works)<sup>1</sup>.

Such a suggestion from a distinguished authority on the comparative study of literature, might make the student of Arabic literature wonder whether he needs, if he ever thought of studying this literature comparatively, to look for relations between Arabic literature and other world literatures, and whether, if he does not find any, to invent these relations, not only between Arabic and other literary works, but also between Arabic literary works and other things that have not been previously classed as literary. Fortunately, such a student of Arabic literature is in no need to look hard for these relations, let alone to invent them, for they are as old as Arabic literature itself, as continuous and lasting as the enduring monuments of this literature, and as rich and diverse as the Arabic literary works themselves. In fact, Arabic literature's relations with other literatures are essential threads of its very fabric.

To begin with, Arabic literature's relations with other literatures of the world go back to the pre-Islamic time if not earlier, when the Arabs of the Peninsula were in close contact with the various surrounding nations and empires. Their relationships with their neighbours were not only commercial, but also political, military, social and cultural. One aspect of the outcome of these ties is reflected in the many foreign words permeated the Arabic language from Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, Latin,

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<sup>1</sup> Haun Saussy, "Comparison, World Literature, and the Common Denominator", in: *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, edited by Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Blackwell, Oxford, 2011), p: 60.

Persian, Amharic, Ethiopian, and several other languages of the Ancient Near East<sup>2</sup>. It is enough to refer in this context to the foreign vocabularies in the Qur'an, the claimed miracle of the Prophet Muhammad which the eloquent Arabs, proud as they were, and are still, of their enduring heritage of verbal art, were challenged and failed to imitate. "Language, as René Wellek rightly states, is the material of literature as stone or bronze is of sculpture, paints of picture, or sounds of music. But one should realize that language is not mere inert matter like stone but itself a creation of man and is thus charged with the cultural heritage of a linguistic group"<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, if the Arabic language, which is the medium of Arabic literature, was so exposed to other contemporary and ancient languages, the literary masterpieces produced with this medium should also have been touched by the cultures of these languages, whose loan words became an integral part of Arabic.

As for the literatures of these languages, they have been in a continuous interaction with Arabic literature, ever since their producers from the various neighbouring nations established any form of contact with the Arabs. Then, with the advent of Islam, came the greatest interaction between the Arabs and the rest of the people of the Ancient World. Thus Peter N. Stearns in his *Cultures in Motion: Mapping Key Contacts and Their Imprints in World History*, writes about this interaction:

One of the great cultural contact experiences in world history involved the spread of Islam, from its initial base in the Arabian Peninsula and the Middle East to a host of areas in Africa, Asia, and Europe. Islam appealed to people in a variety of societies and cultures, bringing important changes as a result of contact while often in some respects merging with the established local belief systems.

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2 Arthur Geoffrey, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, with an introduction by Gerhard Böwering and Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2007); and Kees Versteegh, "Linguistic Contacts between Arabic and Other Languages", *Arabica*, "Linguistique Arabe" *Sociolinguistique et Histoire de la Langue*", Vol. 48,(4), 2001, Pp: 470-508.

3 René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, Third Edition (Penguin Books, London, 1980), p: 22.

Muslims compelled new cultural contacts from about 700 CE onward as a result of conquests, far-reaching trade, and, increasingly, missionary activity. The geographical dimensions of the Muslim world were pretty well established by 1450 CE—the end of the postclassical period—though a few key later chapters would be written in Africa, south Asia, and south Eastern Europe. Islam's spread was gradual though amazingly rapid given the extensive geography and diverse regions involved.

In fact, this gradual and rapid spread of Islam was accomplished through both military conquest and trade and missionary activities. Thus, Peter N. Stearns adds:

In some cases, Islam spread to other cultures in a context of military conquest, even though the religion was tolerant of other beliefs. Muslims rarely forced people to convert to their religion, often preferring to levy a special tax on minority communities instead. The famous jihad, or holy war described by the prophet Muhammad, was mainly used for defense of the faith, not forced conversion, though there were exceptions. But the success of Muslim armies could create a context in which other people found it prudent to convert, or in which they were attracted to the religion simply because of its manifest power and triumph. In other instances, Islam spread through more spontaneous conversions as people learned of it through trade and missionary activity. The religion was clearly attractive, with an explicit set of beliefs about what to do and what not to do in order to win access to heaven and avoid a lamentable eternity in hell. It appealed to lower-class groups because of its commitment to charity and spiritual equality; it also legitimated merchant activity more than did most belief systems at the time, and so could attract traders. The cultural and political achievements of Islam drew people eager to advance their societies in a variety of ways, including religious ones.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Peter N. Stearns, "The Spread of Islam", in:

The spread of Islam, as a matter of fact, accompanied by the acquisition of Arabic as the language of worship, daily life, and later as a medium of literature, consolidated even further this interaction, which had become so deep that it involved the very process of creative writing in Arabic, widely used by the newly converted Muslims. So keen on proving their allegiance and commitment to the new faith, they naturally articulated their new experience under the banner of the newly formed Islamic state in the language of the Qur'an, which they used to recite in their prayers five times a day. Thus, Sir Hamilton Gibb was right when he wrote in his *Arabic Literature: an Introduction*<sup>5</sup>:

Classical Arabic literature is the enduring monument of a civilization, not of a people. Its contributors, nevertheless, under the influence of their Arab conquerors, lost their national languages, traditions, and customs and were moulded into unit of thought and belief, absorbed into a new and wider Arab nation<sup>6</sup>.

As for the Europeans, they have been the closest neighbours to the Arabs for many centuries and to Muslims since the advent of Islam in the seventh century. They were "neighbours in constant contact and communication, often as rivals, sometimes as enemies, and with attitudes towards each other formed and confirmed by centuries of experience, and for the Europeans, of fear"<sup>7</sup>. As a matter of fact, the interaction between Arabic and European literatures, which were produced first in Latin and later in its various vernaculars, reached its zenith in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, with Spain, for more than nine centuries, and Sicily, for almost four centuries, meditating and disseminating the Arabic and Islamic influences throughout Europe.

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*Cultures in Motion: Mapping Key Contacts and Their Imprints in World History*  
(Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2001), pp: 46-48.

<sup>6</sup> (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1974), p: 1.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, (Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1993), p: 17.

Summing up the outcome of this enduring interaction, Peter N. Stearns adds:

The Muslim period in Spain and Portugal had vital consequences. Muslim rulers developed an elaborate political and cultural framework while largely tolerating Christian subjects....

Muslim artistic styles long influenced Spanish architecture and decoration, even after Islam itself had been pushed out. Music, including the guitar, an Arab instrument, merged traditions as well—and from Spain the new styles would later spread to the Americas. Centers of learning, like Toledo, drew scholars from all over Europe, eager to take advantage of Muslim and Jewish science and philosophy; the result helped spur change and development in European intellectual life<sup>8</sup>.

In addition, the experience of the Crusaders in the Levant, which lasted nearly two centuries, and which had left a profound influence on those who survived it and were fortunate enough to return safely to their home countries, consolidated further this process, and transformed almost everything in Europe in the following centuries.

As for the Sub-Saharan Africa, the interactions “occurred during the postclassical period... and by the late twentieth century about 40 percent of all sub-Saharan Africans were Muslim”. Thus, while initial contacts in West Africa focused on the Sudanic kingdoms, headed at first by Ghana, these contacts had some distinctive features:

Trade with Muslim North Africa developed quickly, across the Sahara Desert by camel and horseback. The trade was vital to Ghana for tax revenues and supply of horses. The king of Ghana also hired Arab Muslims to keep records, because they had writing and bureaucratic experience. But contacts also facilitated raids by Muslims from the north, often encouraged by local Islamic groups. The kingdom of Mali, which flourished after Ghana collapsed in about 1200, regularized interactions with

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<sup>8</sup> Peter N. Stearns, *ibid*, p: 49.

Muslims. Rulers like Sundiata more systematically utilized Muslim bureaucrats and converted to Islam as a gesture of goodwill toward the North African trading partners. A king of Mali, Mansa Musa, made a famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, dazzling Arabs with his lavish supply of gold. Mansa Musa also organized a center of Muslim scholarship in the city of Timbuktu, and Muslim architecture spread widely<sup>9</sup>.

As for the East African coast, Arab traders and missionaries in the Indian Ocean worked directly from Egypt, southward, and beginning with the elite, widespread conversions occurred.

Farther south, Swahili merchants—the word in Arabic means “coasters or people who work along the coasts—established a lively commerce between Indian Ocean ports and interior villages. In the process they also brought Arabic language and Muslim religion and political ideas. Many traders intermarried with the African elite, as Islam began to provide cultural unity for upper classes all along the coast. Conversions were voluntary, but Islam represented high social status and the kind of generalized religion useful to far flung trade—a religion that local African cultures did not provide. Mosques and other literary and artistic expressions of Islam followed the shift in beliefs, and a mixed Arabic-African language, Swahili, emerged as well, ultimately providing a system of writing as well as facilitating oral communication. The intrusion of Portuguese power in this region in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries limited further growth, but when Portugal was expelled shortly before 1700 conversions resumed along the trade routes inland<sup>10</sup>.

The spread of Islam on the eastern front covered central Asia, India and, at later stage, the south-eastern areas of the continent. As a matter of fact, Islam was the first outside religion to penetrate the region of central Asia, which had, as a whole, remained, up to the beginning of the eighth century, untouched by the surrounding civilizations. The systematic

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<sup>9</sup> Peter N. Stearns, *ibid*, Pp: 50-1

<sup>10</sup> Peter N. Stearns, *ibid*, p: 51.

spread of Islam in central Asia, involving both of the dominant patterns of Muslim contact: force and persuasion, was most effective, resulting in the majority of its population becoming Muslim today.

Arab conquest pressed into Iran and Azerbaijan in the seventh century, and further conquests occurred in Transoxania, the most settled part of the region, during the eighth century. But there the conquest stopped, and raids between Arabs and Turks ensued. In the ninth century, Muslim traders and then Sufi missionaries began to move out from scattered towns to the nomadic steppes, spreading Islam among the tribal groups. Turkish migrations from central Asia into the Middle East, beginning in the tenth century, further introduced Turks to Islam. A final stage occurred during the Mongol invasions of central Asia and the Middle East in the thirteenth century. The Mongols were not Muslim, but their conquests brought new contacts between central Asia and the Middle East that in turn completed the conversion of the territory to Islam. In east central Asia, Muslim traders and Sufis made further contacts and conversions, bringing Islam to parts of present-day China such as East Turkmenistan. As is common with intercultural contact, Islam did not totally alter the established cultures, which continued distinctive forms of art and music, a devotion to imaginative horsemanship, and a relatively high status for women. But conversion did bring change. A key question at the end of the twentieth century involves what kind of Islamic future this region, now free again, will decide to establish<sup>11</sup>.

Due to the big difference between Islam and Hinduism, the initial trading contacts and even successful Arab raids on Indian territories had little cultural impact. A few pockets of Muslims developed, but as small minorities. Hindus largely tolerated these groups. Changes in Hinduism, including more emotional rituals and use of popular languages rather than the scholarly Sanskrit, bolstered this religion's position. As is common when two major cultures encounter each other, influences moved in both

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11 Peter N. Stearns, *ibid*, p:52.



directions. Muslims learned about Indian science and mathematics, including the numbering system that passed to the Middle East, where it was later adopted by Europeans.

The situation changed in the eleventh century, with wider and more durable Muslim conquests in India....The stage was set for wider confrontation and contact. Conversions to Islam were encouraged by the presence of a Muslim ruling class, but devout Sufi also poured in, hoping to convert the infidels and winning followers by personal example and merit. Muslim religious leaders also adapted to the cultural setting, using Hindu stories but with Muslim characters and building shrines on the sites of Hindu temples and thus appropriating existing sacred territory. Islam specifically attracted warriors and also people from the lowest Castes, drawn by the promise of spiritual equality rather than the Hindu ideas of successive reincarnations. At the same time, a syncretic movement arose within Hinduism, the bhatki cult, that accepted monotheism and spiritual equality—which helped keep some of the lower castes away from Islam proper. Later, in the sixteenth century, when another Muslim empire formed, other Hindu groups developed a new religion from a mixture of Hindu and Muslim principles, notably the Sikhs, who kept many Hindu beliefs but added greater militance.

Overall, however, the main impact of Islam on India was the creation of an important religious minority, in the northwest — closest to the Islamic heartland—but also in the northeast. Most Indians remained satisfied with their own religious culture, and there was no massive immigration of Muslims from other areas. Suspicion of Hindus by Muslim rulers such as those of the Delhi sultanate—who objected to Hindu sensuality and representations of women, which one Muslim writer claimed showed an “essential foulness” in the religion—actually increased loyalty to Hinduism in opposition. Hindu rebellions against Muslim rule, sometimes led by converts to Islam who then changed their minds, also occurred. The difficult relationship between Hinduism and Islam in India—sometimes exhibiting mutual tolerance, sometimes great hostility—continued into modern times, when it was exploited by British colonial rulers, and into

the later twentieth century, when it generated tensions between Muslim Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India<sup>12</sup>.

Unlike other areas in the three continents, where both force and persuasion were used to spread the message of Islam, the final divine message was introduced into south-east Asia during the late fourteenth century entirely by persuasion. The honest conducts of Muslim merchants, who came from Arabia and the Indian Sub-continent, attracted the people of the Malay Peninsula to the message of Islam. While the merchants worked on establishing social and commercial contacts with the elites of the coastal towns and centres of the peninsula, the Sufis operated among the inland people, and soon the entire area was dominated by the followers of the new faith. Peter N. Stearns, again, relates the last chapter of the story of the spread of Islam in the pre-modern era:

Muslim trading ships from Arabia and particularly from India brought both Muslim merchants and Sufis to the Malay Peninsula and the islands that now form Indonesia. Merchants established crucial contacts in the coastal towns, where they influenced the ruling classes. By the fifteenth century, most elites in these cities had been converted. From the coastal towns, Sufis traveled inland, setting up schools and preaching in each village. Islam appealed to inland peoples as a way of integrating with the coastal populations, in a period of expanding trade. By the sixteenth century Islam had become a dominant religion in the Indonesian islands, save for pockets of Hinduism and for isolated, polytheistic peoples in remote parts of the interior. It had won powerful influence on the Malay Peninsula and in the southern part of the Philippines. Its spread was stopped only by the arrival of European naval and commercial superiority during the sixteenth century. Even so, it was not pushed back; Indonesia is the largest Muslim nation in the world today.

Islam in Southeast Asia inevitably merged with regional cultural influences, including popular costumes, dances, and festivals — including brilliant shadow plays and other pre-Islamic staples based on Hindu epics. The Sufis tolerated large

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<sup>12</sup> Peter N. Stearns, *ibid*, p: 54.

remnants of animist, Hindu, and Buddhist beliefs and rituals—many of which orthodox scholars would have found contrary to Islamic doctrine. Social relations were governed by pre-Islamic law, and religious law was applied to very specific types of exchanges. Women retained a stronger position than in the Islamic Middle East, often participating actively in market activities. Islam added, in sum, to the mixed, creative culture that predominated in Southeast Asia<sup>13</sup>.

When one turns to the modern era of interaction between the Arab World and the rest of the globe, one can easily notice that the era of colonizing by Western powers of most of the Muslim and Arab worlds, brought the process of interaction between Arabic and other literatures into a new phase. The presence of the European missionaries, traders, travelers, diplomats, writers, administrators and soldiers throughout the Arab world, started late in the eighteenth century, provided an ample space of encounter that engulfed almost all aspects of life in the Arab world and later in Europe and the Americas. Furthermore, the movement of Arab immigration, started in the mid-nineteenth century to the new world as well as to Western Africa and Australia, and to all parts of Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, had also created more diverse opportunities for interactions, which produced a distinct brand of Arabic literature, namely the early Mahjar (Diaspora) literature, written mostly in Arabic, and the new Mahjar literature, written in other languages such as French, English, Spanish, German, Portuguese, and Italian. In fact, there is hardly any aspect of modern Arabic writings which has not been touched by this encounter, and it is impossible to study these writings without taking into consideration the impact of the interaction, between the Arab world and the rest of the globe, particularly the Western world, on such writings.

In short, every point of contact between Arabic literature and other world literatures is a space of interaction between the two literatures involved in the process, and every space needs a thorough investigation. In order to carry out such an investigation properly and productively, a

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13 Peter N. Stearns, *ibid*, Pp: 54-55.

collaborative work is required on the part of the scholars involved in the comparative study of these literatures, and this would, no doubt, produce a better class of scholarship, urgently needed for the development of the field.

While classical Arabic literature is the outcome of the most fruitful partnership among various nations, peoples, and traditions, Modern Arabic Literature, produced in the Arab world by both native Arabs and Arabic-speaking writers from other ethnicities living there, and in their chosen or enforced exiles all over the world, is the outcome of an all-embracing interaction between its centuries-long tradition and the various cultural and literary traditions of the rest of the world. In other words, viewed as one of the most important aspects of the Arab-Muslim contribution to world civilization, Arabic literature has a unique experience of encounter with the literatures of the world in both Medieval and modern times, in East and West, South and North. Yet, this long, extensive, diverse and rich experience of cross-cultural encounter is, most regrettably, either neglected or ignored by comparatists from both East and West<sup>14</sup>. Although comparative literature is meant to be “a discipline of tolerance”<sup>15</sup>, scholars on both sides of the divide tend to stubbornly deny the importance of this interaction in bringing about the changes we witnessed in the histories of Arabic and other world literatures. Ethnocentricity and Euro-centricity seemed to have affected the attitudes of both Arab scholars and their European counterparts, who tend to play down the role played by national literary traditions in inspiring any changes that had taken place on both sides of the divide between Europe and the Islamic and Arab worlds.

To cite one example of this intolerance, one may refer to the role played by the Anadalucian literary heritage, particularly the Muwashshahs (the Hispano-Arabic strophic poetry composed in classical Arabic) and Zajals (the Hispano-Arabic strophic poetry composed in vernacular Arabic) in the emergence of the ‘courtly love’ phenomenon in

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14 Abdul Nabi Isstaif, “al-Hudur al-Mughayyab lit-Tajribah al-‘Arabiyyah fid-Daras al-Muqaran”, *Thaqafat* (University of Bahrain), no. 17, 2006, Pp: 41-50.

15 Rey Chow, “A Discipline of Tolerance”, in: *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ibid, p: 15.

Europe in the late middle Ages. Writing on the so called ‘courtly love’, in his monumental masterpiece, *The Allegory of Love*, C. S. Lewis sees this phenomenon as “a revolution”, to which the Renaissance itself, when compared with it, “is mere ripple on the surface of literature<sup>16</sup>.”

Everyone has heard of courtly love, Lewis adds, and everyone knows that it appears **quite suddenly at the end of the eleventh century**<sup>17</sup> in Languedoc. The characteristics of the Troubadour poetry have been repeatedly described. With the form, which is lyrical, and the style, which is sophisticated and often ‘aureate’ or deliberately enigmatic, we need not concern ourselves. The sentiment, of course, is love, but love of a highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love. The lover is always abject. Obedience to his lady’s lightest wish, however whimsical, and silent acquiescence in her rebukes, however unjust, are the only virtues he dares to claim. There is a service of love closely modelled on the service which a feudal vassal owes to his lord. The lover is the lady’s ‘man’. He addresses her as *midons*, which etymologically represents not ‘my lady’ but ‘my lord’. The whole attitude has been rightly described as ‘a feudalisation of love’. This solemn amatory ritual is felt to be part and parcel of the courtly life. It is possible only to those who are, in the old sense of the word, polite. It thus becomes, from one point of view the flower, from another the seed, of all those noble usages which distinguish the gentle from the villain: only the courteous can love, but it is love that makes them courteous.<sup>18</sup>

Yet this sudden emergence of courtly love, with its distinctive characteristics, and “the abrupt appearance of complex Occitanian lyric in

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16 C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1958), p: 4.

17 Emphasis is mine.

18 C. S. Lewis, *ibid*, p: 2.

the early years of the twelfth century”<sup>19</sup> which points to a possible connection with an earlier literary phenomenon in the neighbouring Andalucía, namely the two newly invented poetic genres of the Muwashshahs and Zajals, is viewed as a sort of transmutation that could be easily attributed to the genius Troubadours, but never to any external, non-Western element. Although “the court culture of the eleventh-century Arabic Spain was by all accounts brilliant, sophisticated, and particularly interested in artistic creation”, and despite the fact that “secular as well as mystical love was a frequent topic of both lyric and didactic works; theories of profane love had been well worked out before 1100”, and that “motifs (such as the need for secrecy), styles (such as difficult composition), and concepts (such as raqib or “guard”) similar or identical to those of the troubadour poetry appear in the amorous verse of Muslim Spain”<sup>20</sup>, all these parallels were not seen as enough proof of any connection between the troubadour lyric and the Muwashshahs and Zajals of Andalucía. Furthermore, what is really missing of all the arguments against the so-called Arabic theory is the fact that in both phenomena of the Muwashshahs and Zajals on the one hand, and the Troubadours’ songs on the other, the music reigns supreme, and this dominance of music points strongly to the originally Arabic “roots” of a significant part of the three lyrical genres, “given the predominance of Andalusian musical instruments, many of whose names are still distinguishably Arabic”<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, Meg Bogin, in her ‘Historical Background’ to *The Women Troubadours*, quotes René Nelli’s assertion that the poems of the troubadour Guilhem IX

contain the basic canon of ideas –homage to the lady, true love as endless suffering, chastity as the highest expression of true love –that Arab poets had already codified in works such as The (p.45) Dove’s Neck Ring, a mid-eleventh-century treatise by

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19 Gerald A. Bond, “Origins”, in: *A Handbook of the Troubadour*, Edited by F. R. P. Akehurst and Judith M. Davis, (University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 1995), p. 237.

20 Gerald A. Bond, “Origins”, *ibid*, 243.

21 Maria Rosa Menocal, *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric* (Duke University Press, Durham & London), 1994, P: 166.

the Cordoban Ali ibn-Hazm, which contained a chapter on “The Submissiveness the Lover Owes His Lady”<sup>22</sup>.

Then she adds:

Guilhem by all accounts did not begin to write until 1102 just after his return from the Crusades. He had spent a year semi-imprisoned at the court of Tancred, where, presumably, he would have been exposed to Arab poetry. Not only the Crusades but the Reconquista –the continuing effort to re-conquer Spain from Islam –had created an important network of connections between Occitania and the resplendent courts of Christian Spain, where Moorish poets and performers were in residence. Spain was Occitania’s closest neighbor, and there was a constant flow of people back and forth across the Pyrennees...

The influence of Arab culture was so pervasive that it was hardly necessary to leave Occitania to hear the melodies of Andalusia and Arabia. Much of southern France had been conquered by Moslem invaders in the mid-eighth century. Although the Saracens, as they were called, did not maintain their hold for long, they left their mark in place names and, undoubtedly, in the folk imagination. Toward the end of the eleventh century refugees from southern Spain began to settle in the area of Nimes and Montpellier, bringing Arabic and Arab culture once again to Occitania. In Montpellier a colony of Moslem refugees gave lessons in Moorish song and music; in Narbonne, Béziers, Montpellier, Lunel and Vauvert, colonies of Jewish translators and scholars, who were also Andalusian refugees, taught Islamic and Hispano-Arab culture, including poetry and music. A slave trade in Moorish men and women based in Narbonne began in 1149. Inspired by their northern counterparts, many Occitanian nobles kept troupes of Moorish singers at their courts as a sign of status. Guilhem de Poitou had

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<sup>22</sup> Meg Bogin, *The Women Troubadours: An Introduction to the women poets of 12th-century Provence and a collection of their poems* (W. W. Norton and Company, New York and London, 1980), Pp: 45-6.

himself grown up in the presence of hundreds of Moorish joglaresas (femal joglars) who were part of his father's court retinue: the elder count had won them in reward for helping Aragon campaign against the Moors in 1064.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, we still hear some voices in the West, which continue to deny any role, played by the Muwashshahs and Zajals in the emergence in the twelve-century Troubadours' songs. In fact, the role of the Arabs in medieval literary history of Europe is overlooked and the Arabs themselves are always excluded entirely from the historical scene- an exclusion which made Professor Maria Rosa Menocal writes in her book, with its telling title:

This academic conceptual banishment of the Arab from medieval Europe was to have extraordinary power. While versions of the Arabist theory were to be brought up again and again, it would not be reinstated as part of the mainstream of philological thought. The sporadic suggestions of Arabic influence on this or that aspect of medieval European literature or on salient features of its lexicon, such as trobar, were largely ignored, were dismissed as unworthy of serious consideration, or at best were subjected to unusually heated and vitriolic criticism. The proponents of such ideas predominantly Arabists, were dismissed as individuals who simply had an axe to grind rather than a conceivably legitimate contribution to make and who, in any case, were not knowledgeable in the field of European literature<sup>24</sup>.

However, there are some exceptions to this unfair dismissal of the Arabs from the realm of verbal Arts of medieval Europe. These include in particular three major masterpieces produced by oriental peoples, which had been appropriated and freely used by Western writers, namely Ibn al-Muqaffa's translation of *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, Ibn Tufayl's *Hayy Bin Yaqzan* and *Alf Laylah wa Layla*, all of which have been, to use Sandra

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Pp:46-7.

<sup>24</sup> Maria Rosa Menocal, *Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1987), P: 83.



Naddaff's words, emblematic works of world literature, that have "circulated far beyond their linguistic and cultural points of origin" adopting, as they travel, "to various media, genres, and contexts". *Alf Layla*, for example, has been an intertext in so many literary and artistic works to the extent that:

One might productively develop a literary history of nineteenth and twentieth century European and American literature using *Alf Layla wa Layla* as the generative source text. Innumerable Western writers – Beckford, Coleridge, Dickens, Mallarme, Stevenson, Proust, Yeats, von Hofmannsthal, Twain, Borges, among many others – testify to the influence and importance of this work in the development of their own literary imagination. The short story form and the *conte fantastique* in particular, were responsive to the intertextual possibilities of the *1001 Nights*. Two examples suffice: Théophile Gautier's "La Mille et deuxième nuit" (1842) and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade" (1845) represent a general fascination with Scheherazade's fate once she moved beyond the narrative time of 1001 nights into real time as the wife of Sultan Shahriyar<sup>25</sup>.

It seems that, when acknowledging the impact of the Arabian Nights and other works for that matter, Western scholars do so only as a way of emphasising their contribution to the disseminations of these works throughout the globe, ignoring, on the whole, the other most interesting, even exciting, spaces of interaction between Arabic, Western and other literatures of the world such as those of Iberian space and its extension in Latin America.

By the same token, we still witness several Arab scholars strongly object to the idea that modern literary genres such as the novel, short story and drama, were all inspired by the Arabs' encounter with Europe from the late eighteenth century onward, claiming that they were merely

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25 Sandra Naddaff , "The Thousand and One Nights as World Literature", in: *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, Edited by by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (Routledge, New York and London, 2014), P: 491..

developments of Arabic literary traditions in narrative, such as the *maqamah* and dramatic performances<sup>26</sup>.

In short, the interaction between Arabic literature and other literatures of the world has continued, expanded, and deepened, so that by the coming of the new millennia, it has involved almost all the literatures of the world worthy of such a term, being old, medieval, or modern, and covering both East and West, North and South. In fact, among other great literatures, Arabic literature is almost unique in three aspects that cannot be claimed by other literatures: its long, continued, and living presence in the world of verbal art. In fact, this interaction dictates that Arabic literature should be studied from a comparative perspective, and such a study promises to yield many benefits, the most obvious of which are the followings:

To begin with, the study of the relationships between Arabic and other World Literatures, as well as of their impact on the developments of these literatures, is certainly an impossible mission to be accomplished by one scholar, or even by a big team of scholars from one nation. This is all the more obvious in view of the fact that the circle of the contact and interaction between Arabic and other World literatures has expanded over the centuries so much, engulfing virtually not only the literatures of the old world but also those of the Americas, South Africa, Australia, and the Far East. A call for the study of Arabic literature comparatively, therefore, entails, though implicitly, a call for a partnership among all scholars involved in its study, be they Arabs or non-Arabs, from East or West, from South or North. In fact, this partnership would offer a unique opportunity of co-operation between the insiders and outsiders, each of whom would bring his/her own vision and insights into the study of every space of interaction between the literatures involved, gaining, as a result of this complementation, a more rounded and inter-subjective picture of the studied literatures. There are, of course, some excellent comparative works on Arabic literature and its encounter with the 'other', written by gifted scholars from both sides. However, none of these works could claim the perfect status of combining the dual perspective of both the

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26 See for example: 'Ali 'Uqlah 'Arsan, *al-Zawahir al-Masrahiyyah 'Ind al-'Arab*, 3rd edition, expanded and revised (Arab Writers' Union, Damascus, 1985).

insiders and the outsiders. This could only be accomplished by joint work, which affords the necessary knowledge, of languages and literary and cultural backgrounds, for dealing effectively with every case of interaction.

Studying Arabic literature comparatively, on this large scale, and by specialists in the various literatures involved, would certainly enrich the theoretical foundations of comparative approach to literature in general. There is, in fact, a widely spread feeling among the comparatists all over the world, that this approach suffers from its Western-centrism<sup>27</sup>, due simply to the circumstances surrounding its birth and development over the last two centuries. Tapping the contributions of scholars from the rest of the world and drawing on a much expanded circle of materials of interactions between world literatures, would, no doubt, rectify the unhappy present state of the art. To give just a brief example of the potentials of this expansion in perspective and studied materials, one can easily refer to Michael Crichton's interaction with *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia*<sup>28</sup>, as embodied in his novel *Eaters of the Dead*.

In his 'A Factual Note on *Eaters of the Dead*', the "Afterword" he added to the 1993 edition, Crichton acknowledges his debt to *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia*, stating that:

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27 Sukehiro Hirakawa, "Japanese Culture: Accommodation to Modern Time", in: *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, No. 28, 1979, pp. 46-50; Werner P. Friederich, "On the Integrity of Our Planning", in: *The Teaching of World Literature*, Proceedings of the Conference at the University of Wisconsin, April 24-25, 1959, Edited by Haskell M. Block, (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1960), pp. 14-15; and Rey Chow, "In the Name of Comparative Literature", in: *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, Edited by Charles Bernheimer (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1995), P: 109.

28 See: Ahmad Ibn Fadlan Ibn al-; Abbas Ibn Rashid Ibn Hammad, *Risalat Ibn Fadlan Fi Wasf al-Rihalah 'Ila Bilad al-Turk wa al-Khazar wa al-Rus wa al-Saqalibah*, Edited, with commentary and introduction by Sami al-Dahhan, 2nd Edition, (Maktabat al-Thaqafah al-'Alamiyyah, Beirut, 1987); and: Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, *Ibn Fadlan's Journey to Russia: A Tenth-Century Traveler from Baghdad to the Volga River*, Translated with Commentary by Richard Frye (Markus Wiener Publishers, Princeton, ۲۰۰۵).

In the tenth century, an Arab named Ibn Fadlan had travelled north from Baghdad into what is now Russia, where he came in contact with the Vikings. His manuscript, well-known to scholars, provides one of the earliest eyewitness accounts of Viking life and culture. As a college undergraduate, I had read portions of the manuscripts. Ibn Fadlan had a distinct voice and style. He was imitable. He was believable. He was unexpected. And after a thousand years, I felt that Ibn Fadlan would not mind being revived in a new role, as a witness to the events that led to the epic poem of Beowulf.

Although the full manuscript of Ibn Fadlan has been translated into Russian, German, French, and many other languages, only portions have been translated into English. I obtained the existing manuscript fragments and combined them, with only slight modifications, into the first three chapters of *Eater of the Dead*. I then wrote the rest of the novel in the style of the manuscript to carry Ibn Fadlan on the rest of his now-fictional journey. I also added commentary and some extremely pedantic footnote<sup>29</sup>.

He also stresses that all references in his afterword are genuine, while the novel, including its introduction, text, footnotes and bibliography, should properly be viewed as fiction<sup>30</sup>.

The student of this space of interaction comparatively would certainly feel comfortable with applying all the three conditions of the so called 'the French School', i.e., that the comparative study should be confined to the question of influence between different literatures, that the difference between literature should be based on difference in languages, and that the relationship between the two works is real. He would also be happy to consider the various relations between the Ibn Fadlan's text and all other forms of knowledge, required to reach a better

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29 Michael Crichton, 'A Factual Note on Eaters of the Dead', in his: *Eaters of the Dead: The Manuscript of Ibn Fadla, Relating His Experiences with the Northmen in A. D. 922* (Arrow Books, London, 1993), Pp: 184-85

30 Michael Crichton, *ibid*, P: 186.

understanding of the text, including geography, medieval Muslim and European history, anthropology, ethnology, sociology, psychology, etc. as it is suggested by the so called of ‘the American School’, particularly in its Henry Remak’s version<sup>31</sup>. In addition, there is also a unique opportunity to conduct a case study in translation, as well as in comparative stylistics, proposed by Rene Etiemble in his *Crisis of Comparative Literature*<sup>32</sup>. Furthermore, the two texts involved in this comparative study could be considered from the receptionist’s point of view, exploring all forms of passive and positive reception, including what I called somewhere else<sup>33</sup> the critical and inspirational forms of reception, a practice which would meet the requirements of the so called ‘the school of reception’ in comparative study of literature. As for those Comparatists interested in imagological studies, they could find in the image of the Arab/Muslim Ibn Fadlan, as reflected in Crichton’s novel, an appropriate example to consider in detail. Finally, as the novel was made into a successful film entitled “**The 13th Warrior**”, directed by John McTiernan<sup>34</sup> (**Touchstone Pictures**, 1999), with Antonio Banderas (98 mins), comparatists could explore the transformations undergone by the narrative of both Ibn Fadlan and Crichton when they are produced in the movie. Nonetheless, we should not forget that the postcolonial contrapuntal reading is also tenable, particularly in view of the fact that some scholars would see Crichton’s novel and the subsequent making of the novel into a film as an appropriation of the Arabic text on a large scale in both Western literature and cinema. In short, expanding our perspective in our comparative study of literature, would certainly lead to an expansion of the Western/World literary canon, and would enrich no doubt the theory of the comparative study at large.

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31 Henry H. Remak, “ Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function “,in:*Comparative Literature: Method and Perspectives*, Revised Edition, Edited by Newton P. Stallknecht, and Horst Frenz (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edoaresville, 1971), P: 1

32 Rene Etiemble, *The Crisis In Comparative Literature*, Translated, and with a Foreword, by Georges Joyaux and Herbert Weisinger, (Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, 1966), Pp: 48-9.

33 Abdul Nabi Isstaif, “The West’s Reception of Ibn Fadlan’s Epistle’ (in Arabic), *al-Turath al-Arabi* (The Arab Writers’ Union, Damascus, Vol.31, no. 129, spring 2013, Pp: 67-76.

34 (**Touchstone Pictures**, 1999), with Antonio Banderas (98 mins).

Studying Arabic literature comparatively, as stated earlier, would help in a way or another in undermining any sort of self-centrism, be it national, racial, continental, or even cultural, prevailing currently in the comparative study of literature, thus allowing a more humanistic perspective to dominate the field, and this, no doubt, would shake the hierarchical tendency that is permeating many comparative studies of influence published nowadays.

The domination of the humanistic perspective in the comparative study of literature, would ease the existing tension between Islam and the West, and would replace the spirit of confrontation adapted by both sides by a spirit of collaboration and cooperation in order to produce a better class of comparative study of literature free from any form of power- a virus that has contaminated Western scholarship for centuries.

Studying Arabic literature comparatively is, finally, compatible with the many recent academic calls for the study of regional and continental literatures comparatively, and even globally. Here one can refer in particular to *the Comparative History of Literatures in European Language*, published by **The International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA)**, in cooperation with **the Hungarian Academy of Science**, to *Latin American Literature: Comparative History of Cultural Formations*, published by Oxford University Press<sup>35</sup>, and the current program “**Travelling Traditions: Comparative Perspectives on Near Eastern Literatures**”, directors: Friederike Pannewick (Centrum für Nah- und Mitteloststudien/Arabistik, Philipps-Universität Marburg), Samah Selim (Rutgers University, New Jersey), and sponsored by the project **Europe in the Middle East—the Middle East in Europe (EUME)**.

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35 *Latin American Literature: Comparative History of Cultural Formations* Editors: Mario J Valdés and Djelal Kadir, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004).; see also: Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon, “Rethinking Literary History -Comparatively”, *American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper* No. 27, 1994; **Linda Hutcheon, Djelal Kadir, and Mario J. Valdé**, “*Collaborative Historiography: A Comparative Literary History of Latin America*”, *American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper*, No. 35, 1996.

The call for a comparative approach to Arabic literature is, in fact, a methodological necessity, dictated by the very nature of this literature: its medium, the Arabic language, which interacted openly with all living languages since pre-Islamic time; its complex network of relations with other literatures and cultures throughout its long and continuous history; the ethnic diversity of its producers, and, finally, the hyphenated nature of the new Mahjar literature, or rather literatures, produced by Arab writers all over the world and in Arabic and other living languages. Thus the growing feeling among Arab comparatists that such an experience of encounter, between Arabic and other literature of the world, deserves a comprehensive assessment is quite justified. Studying Arabic literature comparatively is urgently needed not only for its vital importance to our understanding of a fascinating and complex chapter in the history of interaction among World literatures, but also for the promising contribution it will make to the theories of comparative literature, which have been dominated by the Western perspective.

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