

Review

Recasting American and Persian Literatures: Local Histories and Formative Geographies from *Moby-Dick* to *Missing Soluch*, Amirhossein Vafa, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, ISBN 978-3-319-40468-4 (hbk), xv + 204 pp.

In established modern critical traditions such as English, French, and German, literary critics work with relatively clear assumptions and principles. For instance, the economy is capitalist, society is an amalgamation of labor relations, there are particulars in literary history that the majority of critics agree upon, and philosophical or textual traditions frame the work of the critic. On the other hand, writing from a peripheral literary perspective, e.g. Persian, resembles launching a startup company where such assumptions or principles must be established from scratch. It goes without saying that in comparative literary studies, the former group often imposes their principles on the latter, muting the theoretical potentials of peripheral texts and extending the legacies of colonialism. In such an environment, sometimes an *event* happens: when a critical work is published that patiently maps and arduously draws principles that competently link aesthetics and politics, arguing how they are constructed and useful for advancing radical textual readings.

Amirhossein Vafa's *Recasting American and Persian Literatures: Local Histories and Formative Geographies from Moby-Dick to Missing Soluch*, is such an event in Persian literary studies. It is an honest, erudite and theoretically sophisticated book that acknowledges the peripheral condition of the traditions it examines, and advances

radical ideas for the development of comparative literature in non-European contexts. It also applies its insights in textual juxtapositions that intervene in debates on world literature, as both a powerful critique and a valuable contribution.

Vafa begins his analyses by positioning himself as an “Iranian observer” who reads *Moby-Dick* in light of mid-twentieth century political events that cast Iran as the “Loose-Fish” of the political ocean, left to be absorbed by the American Empire and through Operation Ajax (1953), pending a backlash in 1979. This political backdrop supports a reinterpretation of a minor character in *Moby-Dick*, the Parsee Fedallah, whose location in the American narrative reflects that of the critical position of the author himself, and both join forces, across time and geography, to counter the dominant readings of this canonical text.

The ambition of the project is to establish new textual juxtapositions and political solidarities. As a “new road map for texts traveling the world,” diverse narratives are approached through their marginal characters: Javid in Esmail Fassih’s *The Story of Javid* (1981), Yezad in Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters* (2002), Mergan in Mahmoud Dowlatabadi’s *Missing Soluch* (1980), the title character in Ghassan Kanafani’s *Umm Sa’d* (1969), and Amiru in Amir Naderi’s film *The Runner* (1984). This investigation will relate an “untold story” from the “margins of *Moby-Dick* and Melville scholarship,” where Fedallah dwells “beyond dichotomous minds and traumatized imaginations.”

It is such a critical position that gives Vafa’s argument its analytical power in a difficult global environment that is intertwined with “the ideological divide between ‘Islam and the West.’” Vafa uses four theoretical angles to advance his interpretive strategies: deconstructing imagined geography, dismantling the core–periphery model in comparative literary studies, imagining a polycentric world literature, and engaging contrapuntal readings. These strategies are then put into extensive practice in separate chapters.

First, the book challenges the dominant imagined geography that defines contemporary literary studies, in order to explain the critical significance of Fedallah, “a minor character who occupies a vast cultural space of Indian, Persian, and Arabic components, bearing the capacity to speak against the grain of Ishmael’s narrative voice,” providing “alternative maps of the world.” The geographical reshuffling challenges dominant mappings that shape the world, speaking against established norms of literary circulation. This is, in fact, the shape and structure of a world literature in which “the institutional goodwill to catalog the world literary wealth ... is irrevocably restrained by economic and cultural implications of globalized capital on the networks of textual exchange.” The imagined geography reveals the architectural limits of “literary texts’ freedom of movement” in the global market.

It is this very same structure, which the author reads from Aamir Mufti’s perspective,¹ that blocks exchanges between contemporary Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, contexts that fail to talk to each other despite sharing a language. This structural shape is even worse between contexts where the networks of historically shared languages

¹Mufti, “Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures,” 458–93.

have collapsed (e.g. Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, etc.) as a result of adjustments to the demands of European modernity, as well as the desire to talk to the West as the ultimate addressee and judge of literary quality and value. Hence, the urgency and necessity of deconstructing the dominant imagined geography.

Despite entering the debate from the margins of the narrative, Vafa makes an important intervention: to resist and dismantle the core–periphery model of analyzing the global circulation and reception of literature, refusing to submit to the structures advanced by corporate publishing houses and implemented by universities:

The expansion of globalized capital and the new international division of labor have since the end of the Cold War challenged the bifurcation of the world between dominant cores and their peripheries, constructing in their stead sites of uneven development as well as decentered sites of solidarity among peoples and cultures around the world.

The aspiration to decouple the subject of the study from the hegemonic models is enhanced by the concept of geopolitical criticism conceived “as the relations between geographical knowledge and cultural productions.” Proposing to resist the normalized Iranian fixation on western imagination, aspiring to shift and diversify the addressee—widening the spectrum from the West to the world—has aesthetic and political implications. Aesthetically, the shift of focus to the margins gives criticism “the insurgent power ... in recasting the canons of national and world literatures.” On the political side, the geographical shift means the West “is no longer our ‘principal interlocutor,’” seeking to build juxtapositions that lead to fresh readings as well as new research questions.

What will replace the binary model? Inspired by David Damrosch,² Vafa proposes “a new literary geometry,” where literary phenomena are produced, circulated, and read through a “polycentric conception of world literatures.” As such, contrary to what Casanova does, Sadeq Hedayat can no longer be read “as an exemplary case of historical amnesia and literary paralysis” in world literature, foregrounding the “socio-economic reality of the author’s death in Paris”³; instead, Hedayat will be read through “his geo-historical roots in Iran and the broader region, his life and work from Tehran to Bombay and Paris,” and through investigating complex dialogues between his potent texts and multiple literary and cultural traditions in diverse languages.

Departing from Damrosch’s corrective definition, Vafa proposes to read texts closely and better: “to rethink the worldliness of literary events by means of a *better*, or better yet subversive, mode of close reading that remaps aesthetic properties against the grain of local and global inequalities that inform institutions of national and world literatures.” To achieve that end, national categories, e.g. American versus Iranian, are replaced by larger categories, “Hemispheric American Studies”

²Damrosch, “Literary Study in an Elliptical Age,” 122–33.

³Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 239.

versus “Continental Iranian Studies,” transnational topics that will improve the potentials of comparative examinations, and lead to new transregional solidarities.

Another method that will be formative to this critical perspective is Saidian “contrapuntal reading,” as the “bifocal integration of the colonizer and the colonized,” a mode of interacting with texts that can lead to subversive readings that dismantle the imagined geographies which, entrenched in the global history of literary studies, exert forms of epistemic violence on peripheral traditions.⁴ This is combined with Spivak’s proposal for “a new Comparative Literature, whose hallmark remains a care for language and idiom,” that is both aware of the asymmetrical structures of world literature and capable of exploring linguistic creativities that give the subaltern the voice they have been denied.⁵

Borrowing from Hamid Dabashi’s critiques of Said and Spivak,⁶ Vafa takes theory a step further. Dabashi intends to build “a bridge between Said’s postcolonial humanism and Spivak’s postmodern antihumanism in order to dismantle the Islam–West divide.” Approaching texts from a marginal perspective, using a polycentric vision of the literary field, and seeking new relations that expose canonical texts and reveal their untold stories will dissolve the binary oppositions that have been constructed through colonial histories.

Contemporary Iranian fiction is put at the center of the debate, engaging in a “reciprocal conversation with Melville’s body of work in general and *Moby-Dick* in particular,” to patiently build on this sophisticated literary project. The second chapter foregrounds Fedallah, weaving a critique of world literature from within the canon of American literature. A subordinate and subdued character acts as the narrative point that offers the first counter-reading; a major result of this shift is that it “expands the horizons visible to Melville’s subversive work.” Fedallah is resurrected in this mode of reading to unsettle dominant interpretations, no longer seeking creativity in the core, but turning that center into the “ethnographical” object of analysis for the peripheral character/critic.

The third chapter provides another sample of this mode of reading, examining other marginal characters: Yezad in Mistry’s *Family Matters* and Javid in Fassih’s *The Story of Javid*: one a Parsi life in Mumbai and the other a national trope in early twentieth century Tehran; unlikely geographies juxtaposed against a background of the now subversive figure, Fedallah. The chapter concludes that the comparison is path-breaking but insufficient because “gendered discourses of nationalism register sites of violence ... against female characters.”

In the fourth chapter the female figure Mergan, in Dowlatabadi’s *Missing Soluch*, becomes the subversive voice. A rural character is foregrounded “as a Muslim woman, strategically though not essentially ... [telling her] story of resilience against locally patriarchal, nationally tyrannical, and globally neocolonial forces.” And

⁴Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. In his analysis, Vafa also uses Russell West-Pavlov’s reading of Said; see West-Pavlov, “Said, Space, and Biopolitics,” 17–41.

⁵Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 5.

⁶Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*.

finally, analysis turns to cinema and Amir Naderi's *The Runner* "as a cinematic realm of new possibilities," in which the teenage Amiru is running "to claim his rights and dares to explore new frontiers."

Such a sophisticated theoretical setting, accompanied by complex close readings, is a daring attempt in a critical system that is dominated by formulaic "application" of theory as the ultimate frontiers of "knowledge." There are, however, two issues that I would like to address here. First, the study skips linguistic examinations to analyze thematic formations and textual dynamics. Vafa is aware of the complexities of translation (the "untranslatables," or what is "gained"), focusing on its after-effects. However, given the political implications of the analyses, samples of accessible texts could have been investigated to showcase the influence of marginality and normalized repressive ideological structures on characters' utterances, and to expose the dents left by history in their linguistic formations.

Second, the core-periphery model is solid and real despite Vafa's attempts to overcome it. The imbalance in the distribution of material facilities and infrastructure, and the huge gap between the significations and functions of institutions in central contexts and peripheral ones are not negligible. In fact, that the author had to leave an intellectually colonized environment to reach a wider consciousness of the orientalist and colonial structures of English literature in contemporary Iran⁷ (Vafa 2020), and that the book was written and published in English, while its radical argument has been neglected in Persian so far, provide evidence that peripheral cultural environments cannot be identical with central ones. It is in fact the underdevelopment of cultural technologies of governance that makes the core-periphery model a grim reality for peripheral critics.

Recasting American and Persian Literatures contributes to a body of work that steps outside the established frames of Persian literary studies, delivering transnational perspectives on contemporary literature, linking aesthetics and politics. It will be years, perhaps decades, before Iranian academia—long stuck painfully at "influence studies"—receives the theoretical maturity of this body of critical studies. Nevertheless, they will pave the way for transregional investigations that promise to further enhance Iranian studies as an engaging and critical field of scholarship.

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⁷Vafa, "Lost in Paradise," 334–39.

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