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Center and Exile in Comparative Literature; An Introduction to the Historical Role of Contemporary Literary Centers of the World in Iranian Literary Developments

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, which focuses on comparative literary studies, “centers” are defined as place-spaces that, for a period, served as meeting points for poets, writers, and thinkers from various nations, thus providing a suitable context for the formation of literary and cultural interactions and the transmission of literary works, genres, and movements from one linguistic realm to another. A “center” is an influential cultural geography in which the interaction of humans, geography, and history fosters the prosperity of cultural and literary exchanges. Within the center—as a platform for the cultural and literary dialogue of nations—the place-space, the subject who thinks and creates within it, and the resulting outcomes are all significant. In summary, it can be stated that a center:

1. Typically possesses prominent scientific, educational, and research institutions, modern and dynamic libraries and literary circles, a unique political-economic position, and a special status in fundamental social transformations; thus, it plays a distinct role in intercultural interactions and the exchange of ideas.
2. Acts as a catalyst and birthplace for certain landmark, influential, and trend-setting literary works, approaches, and events.
3. Is intertwined with exile and migration—linguistic, territorial, and cultural-literary migration. The center becomes the destination for the intentional or forced migration of a subject whose restless spirit, for the sake of writing, is in search of a place; “a room of one’s own.”

The question is: Can Iranian literature be understood without examining what was produced outside the homeland, in literary centers beyond Iran? The answer is no. Writers and poets who lived in external literary centers (including the Caucasus, Istanbul, and Berlin) played a major role in shaping the development of modern Iranian literature:

Talebov’s *Ketab-e Ahmad* and Masalek al-Mohsenin, which alongside Maraghei’s *Safarnameh* are regarded as among the works that helped awaken Iranian society, were written in the Caucasus. It was also there that modern Iranian drama emerged through Akhundzadeh’s *Tamthilat* (Plays). The preface to *Tamthilat* provides the earliest account of modern Iranians’ efforts to become acquainted with European theater.

The diverse Iranian community of Istanbul contributed significantly to Iranian society and literature through the growth of political and critical journalism, the translation of *The Adventures of Hajji Baba*, and the writing of *The Travel Diary of Ibrahim Beg*—two influential political and critical narrative works that affected the evolution of Persian language and literature. They also laid the foundations of modern Persian grammar.

Modern fiction, particularly the short story, entered Iran through Berlin.

The Caucasus, Istanbul, and Berlin performed a dual function: they both opened the eyes of the Iranian subject to the world and world literature, and served as gateways for world literature to enter Iran. The result of this dual function was the creation of fundamental transformations, not only in literature but in all dimensions of contemporary Iranian life, from culture to economy and politics.

Key Finding: Before undertaking a historical-geographical analytical mapping of the literary centers that influenced the development of Iranian literature, our understanding of Iranian literature remains incomplete and imprecise.

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