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Comparative Literature in the Turkish Context: Past, Present and Possible Trajectories

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to offer a concise analysis and evaluation of the historical trajectory and the current state of comparative literature in Turkey with a particular focus on its interdisciplinary nature. Additionally, it seeks to explore the development of comparative literature and translation studies in the Turkish context, aiming to reassess the seemingly close relationship between these adjacent fields within the context of Turkish literature, which can, we believe, encourage border-crossings in comparative and translation studies and open a space for newfangled approaches in comparative studies of translated literature.

摘要

本文旨在对土耳其比较文学的历史轨迹和现状进行简要分析和评价，特别关注其跨学科性质。此外，本文还探讨了土耳其语境下比较文学和翻译研究的发展，旨在重新评估这两个邻近领域在土耳其文学中的密切关系，我们相信这可以鼓励比较和翻译研究的跨界，并为翻译文学的比较研究开辟新的空间。

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1. Introduction

The Turkish literary heritage, with its multiethnic character, can be described as a dynamic framework of beliefs and conventions that have evolved over time through interacting with both Eastern and Western cultures and persisted to this day to shape the current Turkish literary polysystem. Leveraging its imperial legacy of engagement with various ethnic groups and communities sharing literary and cultural proximities, Turkish literature has significantly benefited from the methodologies and techniques of comparative literature. The culture of “comparison,” despite having deep historical roots in Turkey, is still relatively young as an academic field at the local universities, and it is competing for recognition with other fields that have well-defined boundaries. Moreover, while there is notable enthusiasm for various methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches in the global academic arena, Turkish academia has not consistently embraced such trends.

Recent shifts in translation studies toward cultural analysis, coupled with increased attention to translation within comparative literature, have fostered new connections between the two fields, creating opportunities for productive discourse regarding their historical and contemporary landscapes. This development and the shift of focus may pave the way for the future trajectory of comparative studies in the Turkish context as well. The latest report from the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) titled *Futures of Comparative Literature* examines potential intersections between “Comparative Literature and the New Humanities,” as introduced by Ursula K. Heise’s subtitle in the editor’s opening section of the publication. The report offers insight into the overall trajectory of Comparative Literature, addressing its institutional framework, parameters, boundaries, and its growing interactions with both established and emergent themes within the humanities. The present review aims to offer a concise analysis and evaluation of the historical trajectory and the current state of comparative literature in Turkey with a particular focus on its interdisciplinary nature. Additionally, it seeks to explore the development of comparative literature and translation studies in the Turkish context, aiming to reassess the seemingly close relationship between these adjacent fields within the context of Turkish literature, which can, we believe, encourage border-crossings in comparative and translation studies and open a space for newfangled approaches in comparative studies of translated literature.

2. The early phase

Historically, Turkish literature has developed through interactions with a variety of Eastern cultures, integrating diverse ethnicities and cultural influences. The translators of the Ottoman Serai (Divan-ı Hümâyûn), largely composed of Greek subjects under the empire’s protection, played a crucial role in exposing Ottoman literature to European literary traditions. The Greek Rebellion of 1821 highlighted the political engagement of these translators, prompting the Ottoman Empire to establish educational programs aimed at cultivating a cohort of Turkish youth. Part of this initiative included the introduction of French language instruction at the Engineering College (Mühendislikhane-i Berri-i Hümâyûn), which relied on limited translations of imported European texts for instructional purposes. Following the revolt of 1821 and the ensuing Tanzimat reforms, the establishment of the Translation Chamber marked a significant milestone. Educational institutions were modernized with an emphasis on foreign language education – particularly in French – as noted by Demiryürek (130–31).

In 1864, the Language School was established to provide high-quality foreign language teaching, as individually documented by Genç (2003) and Balcı (2008). Additionally, in 1868, Mekteb-i Sultani was established to offer educational programs in French. In 1869, the Ministry of Education established a Translation Society with the aim of systematically translating so-called important books on knowledge and sciences into Turkish for the benefit of the general populace. Again in 1869, a new law was enacted, introducing a novel framework for the Ottoman school system. The General Education Regulation was officially approved and implemented, incorporating Arabic, Persian, and French as optional foreign language courses in the formal curricula. The literature departments of Sultani schools would provide instruction in these languages whereas the scientific departments did not provide any foreign language courses. Darülmüallimîn,

a renowned educational institution, provided courses in Arabic and Persian for the Junior High School teaching program, Arabic, Persian, and French for the Idadi teaching program, and Arabic and Persian as well as “Turkish-French translation” for the Sultani teaching program. Therefore, the translation from French to Turkish was included in the curricula. The “Wisdom and Literature” department of Darülfünûn, a highly esteemed school, provided courses in “Fluent Arabic and Persian” as well as “French, Greek, and Latin languages” for the purpose of improving foreign language education. German and English were incorporated into the curriculum of military schools in the late nineteenth century, as shown by Genç (2003) and Köprülüzade (1928). According to a number of newspaper reports from 1901, the Mekteb-i Harbiye taught the French, German and Russian languages (Demiryürek, 131).

Following the reformation of Ottoman educational institutions, Turkish academia was introduced to English, French, and German literatures. However, this ongoing endeavor eventually faltered due to several factors. In 1900, the first Western-style university, named “Darülfünûn-ı Şahane,” was established, with its Faculty of Literature being one of the three founding faculties, engaging in both teaching and research activities without interruption. The Faculty of Letters was also influenced by the advancements during the Second Constitutional Period, leading to various reforms and the implementation of some adjustments. Notably, the University Reform in 1933 transformed Darülfünun into Istanbul University, integrating European languages and literatures into a four-year undergraduate curriculum. The young Republican curricula were largely designed by Jewish scholars fleeing Nazi persecution, such as Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, who played pivotal roles in shaping European language and literature programs at the newly formed Ankara University post-1936. Esteemed European academics, including Hans Gustav Güterbock, Herbert Louis, Benno Landsberger, Walter Ruben, Georg Rohde, Rasonyi Laszlo, Karl Steuerwald, Georges Bonneau, A. J. Greimas, and Jacques Huré, were instrumental in fostering critical and comparative studies within Turkish academia.¹ The European scientists who were actively involved in the establishment of European literature and language departments also pioneered the introduction of comparative literary studies. In Turkey, comparative literature emerged from the fields of English studies and Germanistik at Istanbul and Ankara universities. The collaboration between scholars Spitzer and Auerbach at Istanbul University introduced the Anglo-American approach to comparative literature to Turkish educational institutions, merging European critical traditions and diverse methodologies with the examination of Turkish literary cultures. This approach was subsequently adopted and expanded by scholars such as Rosemarie Burkart, Sebahattin Eyüpoğlu, and Azra Erhat. İnci Enginün (b. 1940) became a leading figure in promoting Anglo-American comparative curricula at Istanbul University. Her academic journey began under the mentorship of Mehmet Kaplan (1915–1986), a prominent professor of Turkish literature, focusing on the influence of European literature on Turkish literature. The focus of their shared effort was to outline the impact of European literature on Turkish literature.

Emily Apter highlights Istanbul’s pivotal role in the development of comparative literature, emphasizing its unique geographical and cultural position as a bridge between East and West, as well as its ability to blur the boundaries between these cultural spheres. She contends that the city’s distinctive historical and cultural context provided an ideal setting for scholars like Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach to articulate foundational

principles of the discipline. However, Apter's claim that Istanbul is the birthplace of comparative literature reflects a perspective grounded in Anglo-American academic traditions. While Auerbach and Spitzer played a significant role in shaping the field in Turkey, the evolution of comparative literature diverged from its course. In Turkey, the discipline developed as part of a broader and more intricate narrative of Westernization, characterized by ongoing tensions and debates over the extent to which Western influences should inform a modernizing cultural identity.

İnci Enginün's doctoral research, which examined the impact of English writers, particularly Shakespeare and the translations of his works, on modern Turkish writers was published in 1979 by the Istanbul University Faculty of Letters Printing House. This publication significantly contributed to popularizing comparable research and advancing the discipline in Turkey. The spread of her study broadened the reach of the Anglo-American paradigm of comparative literature research.² Enginün furthered her academic pursuits in the UK and the US, presenting at seminars and conferences while exploring the global ramifications of modern Turkish literature. In 1983, she published *Yeni Türk Edebiyatı Araştırmaları* (New Turkish Literature Studies), which included a chapter dedicated to Comparative Literary Studies. In 1991, Enginün released the first comprehensive book in Turkish focusing on Comparative Literature, detailing the theoretical and historical contexts of the discipline within Turkey and including a translation of Saburo Ota's paper on "Statistical Method in Comparative Literature Research." This work reflects Enginün's engagement with prominent theorists like Tiegheem, Brunetiere, Wellek, Lanson, and Remak, providing an extensive overview of the development of comparative literature within literary studies and discussing its position on a global scale.

Similar assertions can be attributed to Gürsel Aytaç (b. 1940) within the realm of German literature and Cevdet Perin (1914–1994) in French literature. Aytaç has significantly enriched the discipline of Comparative Literature in Turkey through her contributions to the field of Germanistik. She explores the imperial and multinational roots of Ottoman culture, referencing Goethe's notion of "Weltliteratur." She posits that Turkish literary culture embodies both European and Asian characteristics, highlighting that Persian language influenced Turkish poetry even until the early twentieth century, after which modern Turkish literature predominantly began to reflect European traditions, particularly those from France (Aytaç 25). Aytaç also emphasizes the critical importance of translating works by authors across various literatures, including German, English, Russian, French, Spanish, and American. Additionally, she refers to the translations of Shakespeare into Turkish by Halide Edip and addresses Enginün's criticism regarding translations, pointing out the similarities between Turkish and English readerships. Aytaç argues that the field of comparative literature in Turkey has been shaped by the contentious discourse surrounding European, Greek, Persian, and Arabic influences on Turkish literature, a discourse enriched by a fusion of critical and popular perspectives from various writers, including Namık Kemal, Attila İlhan, Cemil Meriç, Halikarnas Balıkcısı, Halide Edip Adivar, and Sebahattin Eyüpoğlu.

3. Comparative literature today: the status quo bias

The contemporary landscape of Turkish Comparative Literature, along with its distinct methodologies, is vital to understanding the potential benefits and challenges

that may influence the future of the discipline in Turkey. The field of comparative literary studies in Turkey tends to remain distanced from emerging trends in both subject matter and methodological innovations. The initial phase of comparative literature has had a profound and enduring effect on the present state of the discipline. Programs dedicated to comparative literature at universities, as well as research conducted by scholars within departments of European language and literature, risk confining their work to the originally defined limits of the discipline. The approaches of some Turkish scholars in comparative literature share similarities with the French academic tradition, which has traditionally organized claims in this field. Evidence of the French traditional method can also be discerned in the French educational framework. Comparative Literature is generally perceived to have emerged following the resurgence of national literatures in Europe, while the history of Turkish literature is commonly categorized into Pre-Islamic, Islamic, and contemporary Turkish literature influenced by European writings. Contemporary Turkish literary culture possesses the potential to integrate recent frameworks and advancements in the field of comparative studies.

Comparative Literature has become an established and nuanced discipline within the humanities in numerous Western countries, with dedicated departments functioning in various higher education institutions for an extended duration. However, it is a relatively new field in Turkey, where it has only recently been recognized within the humanities in various higher education settings. The first Comparative Literature Department in Turkey was established in 1996 at Istanbul Bilgi University, and from 2000 to 2016, a limited number of bachelor's and master's degree programs emerged at several universities. In Europe, Comparative Literature has solidified its status as an interdisciplinary subject amalgamating the study of literary and cultural histories. Conversely, in Turkey, the field remains in development, striving to define its scope and establish connections with other established or emerging disciplines within the humanities. For example, in the Turkish context, both comparative literature and translation studies endeavor to assert themselves as distinct fields separate from traditional departments focusing on national literature and philology. While translation studies emerged as a subfield of comparative literature in Europe during the latter half of the twentieth century, it is not currently considered a component of comparative literature in Turkey. Both disciplines aim to establish clear boundaries and assert their autonomy, resulting in a lack of the collaborative effort observed in Western countries between comparative literature and translation studies.

In Comparative Literature, translation plays a critical role in the analysis and comparison of literary works across diverse languages and cultures. This significance is underscored by the necessity of examining texts in their translated form. The intersection of comparative and translation studies involves the analysis and assessment of works across a multitude of disciplines, languages, nationalities, cultures, and countries from various perspectives. Engaging in comparative analysis of literary works necessitates evaluating the translated text alongside the original, without establishing a hierarchical relationship between the two. We assert that the programs and scholarly research should be examined more extensively in the subject of translation studies, as well as in comparative literature. Furthermore, we contend that adopting unconventional and innovative methodologies in comparative studies may yield more productive results for both fields.

The Turkish context reevaluates the evolving roles of translation and comparative studies of translated literature, advocating for further dialogue between the two disciplines. Translated texts enter the literary system – or any target culture – as novel phenomena, capable of influencing the host culture in unexpected and transformative ways that were not foreseen by the original text or its originating culture. It is crucial to acknowledge the lack of comparative evaluations of translated literature, which presents a remarkable opportunity for interdisciplinary research bridging translation and comparative literature. While interest in translation is growing, particularly with the increasing number of non-Western texts being integrated into Western literary frameworks, translated literature is often not the focal point of comparative literary studies outside the realm of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA). A similar situation arises in Turkey when asserting that any comparative study of literary texts belonging to different languages dictates the assessment of the translated text alongside the source text, inadvertently establishing a hierarchical relationship between the original and translated works. As such, the current emphasis of comparative literary studies in Turkey remains largely outside the scope of the ACLA zone, despite a burgeoning interest from Turkish academia in this area, especially concerning the expanding repertoire of non-Western literature within the Turkish polysystem of translated literature. As Munday indicates, in comparative literature, “where literature is studied and compared transnationally and transculturally, necessitating the reading of some works in translation,” translation is an integral aspect of literary texts belonging to various languages and cultures (15).

4. Possible trajectories of comparative literature in Turkey

The development of Comparative Literature in Turkey, though influenced significantly by figures such as Spitzer and Auerbach, has followed a distinct trajectory from its evolution. It emerged within a broader and more complex narrative of Westernization, shaped by ongoing tensions and debates over the extent to which Western influences should guide a modernizing cultural identity. Although Spitzer and Auerbach have remained central to the legacy of both Western and Turkish comparative literature, Turkey’s academic engagement with the field has historically been bordered by its Westernization efforts, which has often reinforced a predominantly Eurocentric perspective.

Despite this historical context, emerging trends like digital humanities and world literature studies and technological advancements such as machine translation and digital archives offer Turkish academia a unique opportunity to redefine its contributions to global comparative literature. This shift may pave the way for a more inclusive and diversified intellectual tradition. For instance, David Damrosch highlights the transformative potential of digital tools such as Google Translate, which have achieved increasing levels of accuracy. He argues that digital adaptations of classical texts, such as *Gilgamesh* and *The Inferno*, help preserve their relevance by transcending linguistic and cultural barriers (Damrosch 202, 237). Real-time machine translation further challenges traditional notions of national literatures, enabling texts to circulate across diverse contexts. This technological shift disrupts Eurocentric frameworks by offering unprecedented access to global literatures, previously constrained by language, geography, and established literary canons.

Scholarly discussions, particularly within the framework of the American Comparative Literature Association, and technological advancements advocate for an inclusive and interdisciplinary approach that dissolves traditional boundaries of national literatures and facilitates global cultural intersections. This transformation holds particular relevance for Turkish academia, presenting an opportunity to move beyond its Eurocentric orientation and embrace a broader, technology-driven engagement with world literature. By integrating Eastern literatures and perspectives or emphasizing the shared literary heritage between the Soviet Union and Republican Turkey, Turkish scholarship can position itself within a more interconnected and dynamic global framework. Insights from the American Comparative Literature Association discussions provide valuable guidance for Turkish comparative literature to overcome its Eurocentric traditions and adopt a more inclusive perspective. Integrating non-Western texts and perspectives is an essential step, especially as advances in artificial intelligence and neural machine translation break down barriers to engaging with Eastern and other non-Western literatures. These developments reinvigorate debates about the boundaries of national literatures and the global significance of texts.

In this context, Damrosch provides a compelling framework for understanding world literature. He posits that works capable of gaining depth and meaning through translation can transcend their national or regional origins to achieve global significance. Conversely, texts that lose their essence in translation tend to remain confined to their local traditions. For Damrosch, a work's ability to expand its reach and resonance without compromising its core qualities determines its entry into the global literary canon.

The transformation in Comparative Literature is further supported by the rapid growth of the translation industry and the increasing global circulation of literary works. Translation has become a vital medium for fostering dialogue and intersection among diverse cultural and literary traditions. Rebecca Walkowitz, in her 2017 ACLA report, envisions a future where literary works are inherently multilingual, multimodal, and designed for diverse audiences from their inception. She argues that "future reading is foreign reading," emphasizing that readers will no longer be confined to a single cultural or geographic identity but will represent a broad and unpredictable range of perspectives. The increasing flow of translated texts, both fictional and non-fictional, reflects this global shift. Translations now move in multiple directions – not only from Europe and America to non-Western regions but also in reverse – fostering a more balanced literary marketplace. Writers increasingly recognize that translation is essential for their works to gain international visibility. Hülya Yıldız emphasizes that the global circulation of literary works fundamentally depends on translation. She asserts that the value of a translated text relies not only on the quality of the original work but also on the skill and precision of the translator. In this context, translators emerge as key figures in shaping the accessibility and trajectory of texts as they traverse cultural and linguistic boundaries.

5. Conclusion

Recent American Comparative Literature Association reports have introduced novel trajectories and perspectives for the future of Comparative Literature as a field of

study. In parallel, the exploration of fresh insights within comparative literature and translation studies can encourage scholars to adopt innovative approaches to the analysis of translated literature. In Anglo-American academia, the regular convening of scholars and the subsequent publication of ACLA reports furnish the necessary context for discussion and problem-solving strategies within the discipline. However, contemporary subjects such as globalism, diversity, interdisciplinarity, and potential future directions for the discipline are not effectively disseminated within Turkish academia, which often operates under specific political and cultural agendas. The integration of diverse cultures and languages, along with the incorporation of the American Comparative Literature Association reports into Turkish academia during the post-imperial and young republican periods, appears significantly more challenging than in the Americo-European context. The discipline of Comparative Literature itself has devised a framework for assimilating various “other” and “alien” discourses, and the American Comparative Literature Association initiatives encourage broadening the parameters of the field to avert potential constraints and push the boundaries of the discipline to prevent its potential rigidity.

The recently suggested directions and new recommendations from the American Comparative Literature Association have the potential to enrich comparative studies in Turkey, enabling Turkish academia to leverage American experiences in addressing the challenges posed by its own historical legacy while embracing opportunities presented by the modern global landscape. Given that Turkish culture is currently grappling with complexities associated with globalization, immigration, multiculturalism, and identity, it is likely that such interdisciplinary engagement and border crossing may yield specific and pragmatic solutions for the future development of the discipline in Turkey. It is imperative to differentiate between comparative literature and comparative literary studies as distinct entities. In practice, comparative literature is defined as the reading and analysis of texts derived from two different languages, cultures, authors, subjects, or works, with the goal of evaluating their similarities and differences. The purpose of Comparative Literary Studies lies in establishing frameworks for analyzing both comparable and disparate texts. While the interpretation of humanist themes in the poetry of Yunus Emre and Geoffrey Chaucer, for instance, serves as a practical critique within the scope of Comparative Literature, a historical analysis aiming to illuminate the connections between the two poets enters the theoretical domain of Comparative Literature Theory. Nonetheless, both fields and their often ambiguous methodologies are employed in the Turkish context and discourse when referring to comparative literary studies.

Notes

1. For further information about the programs, refer to <http://almande.humanity.ankara.edu.tr>.
2. Notes on Enginün’s works and her unique contribution to comparative literature were provided by Hülya Argunşah, Professor of Turkish Literature at Erciyes University (July 14, 2024). In her *Türk Edebiyatı’na Açılan Pencere: Prof. Dr. İnci Enginün’ün Hayatı* [A View from Turkish Literature: İnci Enginün’s Life], Argunşah examines Enginün’s impact on the field of comparative study in Turkish literature. She asserts

that Enginün's most notable contribution to comparative literature lies in her investigation of the potential influence of English literature on contemporary Turkish writers.

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