



## The Dialectic of Influence and Interaction in Comparative Literature: A Study of Mechanisms

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### **Abstract:**

*Comparative literature is among the most significant terms that have sparked wide-ranging debate in modern comparative studies through the divergence of opposing perspectives and differing viewpoints in the attempt to arrive at a precise and clear concept that reveals the points of convergence in the meaning of this term and its association with the dialectic of influence and interaction, which truly constitutes the authenticity of this term through the national and global connections and relations it encompasses and the evident impact it leaves on the reception of any literary work, particularly those related to mass readership, in which the receiver forms an essential element in constructing the creative process.*

**Keywords:** *Comparative literature, influence and interaction, literary reception, receiver.*

## **La dialectique de l'influence et de l'interaction en littérature comparée : une étude des mécanismes**

### **Résumé :**

*La littérature comparée est l'un des termes les plus importants qui ont suscité un large débat dans les études comparatives modernes, en raison de la divergence des perspectives opposées et des points de vue divergents dans la tentative d'aboutir à un concept précis et clair qui révèle les points de convergence dans la signification de ce terme et son association avec la dialectique de l'influence et de l'interaction, qui constitue véritablement l'authenticité de ce terme à travers les connexions et les relations nationales et*

*mondiales qu'il englobe et l'impact évident qu'il laisse sur la réception de toute œuvre littéraire, en particulier celles destinées au grand public, dans lesquelles le récepteur constitue un élément essentiel dans la construction du processus créatif.*

**Mots clés :** *Littérature comparée, influence et interaction, réception littéraire, récepteur.*



## **Introduction:**

Comparative literature is considered one of the most important modern disciplines to have recently emerged in the field of literature and criticism. Its development has been linked to several studies that focused on comparisons among various studies, particularly Western studies, which provided fertile ground for such comparative endeavors. The objective was to bring diverse viewpoints closer together and to examine the various and shared connections among different studies. Consequently, the comparative literature has established a distinctive position for itself through two fundamental factors: influence and interaction. These have taken various forms, including literary and nonliterary influences, as well as direct and indirect influences. This was undertaken to achieve accurate results that enhance the value of comparative literature in relation to other studies.

Moreover, these two elements have been linked to the concept of literary reception beyond national boundaries through a structured, rigorous process that examines literature outside its borders and explores the relationships between the source literature and other fields of knowledge related to human expression in general. Since comparisons across different studies necessitate the search for the sources and manifestations of beauty within literary work, this discipline must both influence and be influenced, given the diversity and divergence of critical perspectives. Accordingly, it becomes imperative to raise a set of questions, the most important of which are as follows: What are the boundaries of the dialectic of influence and

interaction in the comparative literature? What are its domains? Moreover, what is its relationship to the concept of literary reception through highlighting the role of the receiver in producing the meaning of the text?

### **1. The boundaries of influence and interaction:**

The concept of influence and interaction is among the most significant issues associated with the term comparative literature. It is a subject that has prevailed among many critics, particularly within the traditional classical school. "There is no doubt that studies of influence and interaction must not be reduced to mere bookkeeping or literary imports and exports. The influence of one national study on another neither diminishes the originality of the literature influenced nor enhances the originality of the literature exerting influence; rather, it demonstrates that national studies interact and exchange influences among themselves, thereby enriching one another. "<sup>1</sup>

Comparative literature has strong connections with the French school, whose leading figures maintain that comparative literature is inseparable from literary history, since the latter, in their view, constitutes one of the essential conditions upon which comparison is based. Accordingly, the historical perspective serves as a fundamental cornerstone in the study of a crucial dialectic—namely, influence and interaction—which itself constitutes one of the essential means of studying different studies through literary exchanges conducted in diverse languages. This makes comparative literature a meeting ground for various studies, linking historical relations between the past and the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Abduh 'Abboud, "Al-Adab wa Ḥiwār al-Ḥaḍārāt," *Majallat al-Ma'rifa* 473 (2003): 30.



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present, especially the element of influence, which is also tied to the process of literary reception. Literary influence is manifested in the revelation of the reciprocal relationship among different literary works, a position embraced by the majority of critics of the French school.

This influence often occurs directly between these various studies, which are separated by a range of boundaries, the most prominent of which are linguistic and geographical. Many scholars agree that the field of study in comparative literature is highly complex due to the diversity and multiplicity of its forms. This complexity constitutes an obstacle for researchers, who find it difficult to distinguish among the various aspects of divergence within the dialectic of influence and interaction. Consequently, these researchers endeavour to trace and reveal the reciprocal relationship between them, a task considered the cornerstone of French school thought.

To transcend these boundaries, the writer must examine the author's original text under study, grounding the analysis in its national identity by tracing the various connections among these studies. Such comparisons may also arise through a range of mediating channels, including newspapers, translated works, and periodicals.

The world literature has its own influences and interactions, manifested through a series of phenomena that appear as currents simultaneously influencing and being influenced through processes of interaction, such as those between Roman and Greek literature. The relationship that developed between these two studies represents the earliest instance of what critics examined prior to the emergence of the term comparative literature. These critics sought to lay

the foundations of the term by establishing specific standards and criteria for various literary subjects, drawing upon ancient literature.

The field of study concerned with what is referred to as influence and interaction is complex, as it assumes various forms and patterns to uncover the relationship between the two poles involved: the sender and the receiver. "The sender may be regarded as the origin in cases of translation, as the model in cases of imitation, and as the source in cases of influence, while on the opposite side, translation and imitation take their own names from the receiver, whereas the influenced work has no specific name by which it may be identified or referred to."<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, the sender constitutes one party of the equation, either as an author or simultaneously as a literary genre, in addition to the receiver, who may, in turn, share similar functions with the sender. This can result in certain combinations of the two, whereby comparative studies become more effective and fulfil their purpose through a series of relations that emerge when one writer becomes acquainted with another's text and reformulates it in their own way. In doing so, they integrate new patterns that authentically highlight the national literature to which they belong, raising the question of whether they have indeed achieved a form of supremacy over other foreign literature through the dynamics of influence and interaction.

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<sup>2</sup> al-Tahir Ahmad Makki, *Al-Adab al-Muqāran: Usuluhi wa Tatawwur Manahijihi* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1987), 271.



## 2. The Concept of Comparative Literature (*Littérature comparée*)

Comparative literature is one of the most important modern disciplines that has generated significant debate within comparative literary studies. This is due to the divergent perspectives and diverse ideas among scholars who have sought to enrich the study of literary comparison across languages, thereby attempting to establish a theoretical foundation for this emerging term. However, defining the boundaries of this concept has not been achieved through unified perspectives, owing to the multiplicity of cultures, languages, literatures, and ideas. As a result, formulating a single definition upon which all could converge has proven elusive. This, in turn, opened the door for scholars to globalise this newly emerging concept, moving literature beyond the confines of narrow nationalism toward broader universality by reevaluating national literary discourse.

The connections among the world literature and languages are as old as literary creativity itself. History tells us, for example, of Pharaonic Egyptian elements within the Greek theatre, just as Roman theatre flourished in the shadow of the Greek theatre. Likewise, Arabic literature exerted wide-ranging influences on Europe during the Arab presence in al-Andalus.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, comparative literature has acquired multiple and diverse definitions. This divergence in its conceptualisation is due mainly to differing perspectives and ideas across countries and critical schools. Some

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<sup>3</sup> 'Isam Bahi, *Tala'i' al-Muqārana fi al-Adab al-'Arabi al-Hadith* (Cairo: Dar al-Nashr lil-Jami'at, 1996), 11.

scholars in the field have even criticised the term "comparative literature," considering it reductive and implicit, and have suggested instead that it should be called "the comparative history of literature" or "the history of comparative literature." However, the term "comparative literature" ultimately prevailed because of its simplicity and conciseness as a technical designation.<sup>4</sup>

The French school was the first to engage with this concept, beginning in 1827.<sup>5</sup> French universities became centres for teaching comparative literature in the service of national literature and its criticism. This is clearly evident in the words of the French scholar Jean-Jacques Ampère, who declared in one of his lectures at the University of Sorbonne: "Gentlemen, we shall undertake these comparative studies without which the history of literature remains incomplete."<sup>6</sup>

In general, its most prominent definitions are as follows:

Comparative literature is the discipline that investigates and compares the analogous relationships among different studies in different languages. Its domain is purely literary, and it seeks to establish connections between literature and other human arts.<sup>7</sup> This concept somewhat complicates the task of defining the nature of comparative literature, since no individual can master all the arts and sciences necessary to conduct comparisons of literary production across

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<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Ghunaymi Hilal, *Dawr al-Adab al-Muqāran fi Tawjih Dirasat al-Adab al-‘Arabi al-Mu‘asir* (Cairo: Nahdat Misr li-l-Tiba‘a wa-l-Nashr, n.d.), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Ibrahim ‘Abd al-Rahman Muhammad, *Al-Adab al-Muqāran bayn al-Nazariyya wa-l-Tatbiq*.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Abd al-Hamid Ibrahim, *Al-Adab al-Muqāran min Manzur al-Adab al-‘Arabi (Muqaddima wa Tatbiq)* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1997), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Badi‘ Muhammad Jum‘a, *Dirasat fi al-Adab al-Muqāran* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahda al-‘Arabiyya, 1980), 13.



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languages and diverse fields. Comparative literature is "the history of international literary relations; from this perspective, the comparative researcher pauses at linguistic or national boundaries and observes the exchange of themes, ideas, books, and sentiments between two or more literatures."<sup>8</sup>

Others maintain that comparative literature is the systematic art that investigates relations of similarity, proximity, and influence and that brings literature closer to other fields of expression and knowledge or to literary facts and texts, whether distant in time and placed or proximate on the condition that they belong to different languages or cultures forming part of a shared heritage, to describe them more accurately, understand them more profoundly, and appreciate them more fully.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. Reading and Literary Reception

The term "reading" has occupied a significant position in modern critical studies and has deep roots in the Arabic critical tradition, closely tied to what is found in the Qur'ān. This is clearly manifested in Sūrat al-‘Alaq: "Read in the name of your Lord who created" [Sūrat al-‘Alaq, 1]. The word *qirā'a* (reading) "means collecting, joining, and pronouncing words."<sup>10</sup> In this sense, reading is intrinsically linked to oral performance through the act of pronunciation and the rendering of meaning in a manner consistent with proper

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<sup>8</sup> Marius-François Guyard, *Al-Adab al-Muqāran*, trans. Henry Zoghbi (Beirut: ‘Awidat Publications, 1988), 15.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel-Henri Pageaux, *Al-Adab al-Muqāran al-‘Amm*, trans. Ghassan al-Sayyid (Beirut: Union of Arab Writers Publications, n.d.), 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-‘Arab*, vol. 14 (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 2005), 50.

reading on the basis of a sound understanding of language. This involves multiple intersections as the process of engaging with, shaping, illuminating, and activating the text unfolds.

This is the text that Roland Barthes views as an *écriture* shaped by a series of activities and interactions through the activation of the concept of reading. This *écriture* becomes a text within the framework of literary work. He stated, "The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author. In the literary work, there is an author; in the text, there is a scriptor. Between the author and the work, there is a relationship of ownership, and a relationship of suffering."<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, Barthes explicitly highlighted the role of the receiver through what has come to be known as mass reading. The receiver (reader) thus became an essential party in the act of reading through the element of ownership linked to the aesthetic dimension. This occurs through the interaction between the text as a literary work and the reader, who responds to the text's call and reveals the latent secrets it carries, secrets that merit clarification and exposition.

The reader here serves as an informer of these secrets: "The informer-reader acts as a source of stylistic inference, from which the analyst gathers all the normative judgments they express, considering them as a kind of response resulting from stimuli embedded within the text. Although these judgments are subjective and evaluative, linking them

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<sup>11</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mawt al-Mu'allif*, in *Durus al-Simiyuluja*, trans. 'Abd al-Salam bin 'Abd al-'Al (Casablanca: Dar Toubqal li-l-Nashr, 1986), 85.



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to their causes ensures that they are never arbitrary.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, the reader's function is defined by the dynamics of acceptance and rejection.

Here, the reader interacts with the text through the production of meaning, opening a vast space for multiple interpretations and rejecting the constraints of a single, fixed reading. This process gives rise to what may be termed *interactive reading*, which seeks out the loci of beauty within the literary work by reproducing the text and presenting it to the reader in a renewed form and from a fresh perspective.

This highlights the role of the receiver, whereby “the reader aesthetically unveils the artistic elements of the text through the act of reading. This, in turn, reflects an aspect of phenomenology in the relationship between subject and object within the process of perception.”<sup>13</sup>

Here, the reader's role in revealing the text's specific aesthetic dimensions becomes evident. A fusion occurs between the text and the reader: the reader alone cannot realise the meaning of the literary work, nor is the text itself the literary work in its entirety. Instead, it is the interaction between the text's structure and the receiver that brings the text into being. At this point, the function of the receiver emerges as it uncovers the text's hidden meaning, producing a dynamic interplay between the artistic pole embodied in the text and the aesthetic pole embodied in the receiver.

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Abd al-Salam al-Masdi, *Al-Aslubiyya wa-l-Aslub (Nahwa Badil Aḥsanī fi Naqd al-Adab)* (al-Dar al-‘Arabiyya lil-Kitab, 1982), 84.

<sup>13</sup> Sha‘ban ‘Abd al-Hakim Muhammad, *Nazariyyat al-Talaqqi fi Turathina al-Balaghi wa-l-Naqdi* (Amman: Al-Warraq Institution, 2019), 28.

This relationship between the text and the reader constitutes one of the fundamental pillars upon which reception theory is built. Wolfgang Iser argues that “the text is not meaning itself but the necessary medium through which consciousness becomes aware of itself.”<sup>14</sup> The reader, in turn, imparts new dimensions to the text, contributing significantly to the creation of a dialogue between these two poles. This is what Iser developed by introducing procedural tools, building on the work of Hans Robert Jauss, who offered a new historical perspective grounded in the aesthetics of reception. Jauss regarded history as a crucial factor in shaping the audience's reception of literary work and in issuing judgments through the authority of the receiver, employing what is termed mass reading.

Drawing inspiration from the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jauss integrated an interpretive dimension. Gadamer holds that “reading heritage requires the formation of a hermeneutic consciousness grounded in historical and critical sensibility in addressing issues of heritage, and in a distinctive rationality when examining its origins and understanding its structure, meaning the application of meanings revealed by the truths of history and heritage.”<sup>15</sup> According to this view, Gadamer sees the past as something that can be recalled and reinterpreted by combining the questions of the past with those of the present. He articulates this through the concept of *hermeneutics*, highlighting his interpretive theory grounded

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<sup>14</sup> Nabila Ibrahim, “Al-Qari’ fi al-Nass (Nazariyyat al-Ta’thir wa-l-Ittisal),” *Majallat Fusul* 1 (1984): 102.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Bouchaïr, *Gadamer: min Fahm al-Wujud ila Fahm al-Fahm* (Algiers: Dar al-Ikhtilaf, 2011), 10.



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in an understanding of existence, fundamentally tied to language, and intimately connected to the text itself.

The text, in turn, refers us back to the reader, who internalises its meaning and constructs an aesthetic object within it by activating and mobilising their perceptual capacities in the act of grasping its meanings.

On this basis, Wolfgang Iser considers the receiving subject to be crucial in the process of understanding, interpreting, and constructing literary work through the act of textual production. This occurs by examining, scrutinising, and observing all its transformations. The relationship between the text and the reader moves toward interaction: the first pole is the text, and the second pole is the reader, who seeks out loci of beauty through the reading public. "Readers are, in most cases, neither a single mass, nor a coherent segment, nor a climate; they are isolated samples or, more generally, the embodiment of the individuality and specificity of reception."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the role of the reader has become an active one in the production of the text through the construction of a new horizon, embodied in the reader's text. The literary work's value is thus generated through the interaction between the dual poles of the text, which constitute the artistic pole, and the receiver, which constitutes the aesthetic pole. "The reader begins to understand the new or previously unknown work insofar as they reshape their literary horizon by perceiving the assumptions that guided their understanding; yet, engagement with the text is always

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<sup>16</sup> 'Ali Ja'far al-'Alaq, *Al-Shi'r wa-l-Talaqqi (Dirasa Naqdiyya)* (Amman: Dar al-Shuruq, 2002), 64.

simultaneously passive and active. <sup>17</sup> The reader's role is therefore to interrogate the text and generate its latent phenomena through their horizon of expectations, thereby realising the act of reading, which "has become a central critical-aesthetic activity that reproduces the text and presents it through a different vision."<sup>18</sup>

Accordingly, this process of textual production has become tied to the receiver, who now possesses heightened aesthetic awareness through skillfully engaging with and dialoguing with the text to obtain the fruit of reading. This moment constitutes the ultimate aesthetic experience the reader seeks, revealing the work's actual value.

## Conclusion:

The most significant finding of this study is that, as a whole, comparative literary studies have served the artistic and intellectual currents of comparative literature through the dual dynamics of influence and interaction, aiming to bring different viewpoints closer together. This has elevated the value of comparative literature and uncovered aesthetic loci across different world cultures, particularly in French schools, which view most literary exchanges as grounded in historical knowledge—an essential element for the validity of all comparative literary studies. This positioning of comparative literature grants it an aesthetic and artistic

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<sup>17</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Jamaliyat al-Talaqqi (Min Ajl Ta`wil Jadid li-l-Nass al-Adabi)*, trans. Rashid Bin Haddou (Rabat: Dar al-Amān, 2016), 145.

<sup>18</sup> 'Ali Salibi Majid al-Marsoumi, *Al-Sha`ir al-'Arabi al-Hadith Naqidan (Naqd al-Fikr, al-Naqd al-Thaqafi, al-Naqd al-Jamali)* (Amman: Ghaida' Publishing and Distribution, 2016), 226.



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appreciation shaped by the interaction between the artistic pole, represented by the text, and the aesthetic pole, represented by the receiver, thus opening the way to a multiplicity of readings.

Another key conclusion is that the historical dimension is one of the most important foundations of comparative literature. By renewing their literary histories and tracing the historical connections of literary texts through diverse intellectual and literary currents, it is vital to study societies and their mutual relationships. This serves the national literature, which engages with a wide range of themes and literary genres and calls for the presence of new forms and ideas circulating among different literatures.

In this way, the scope of comparative literature expands and interacts with other national literature, enriching it and adding new dimensions, thereby enabling the study of various literary phenomena that may impart a universal character. It also allows diverse ideas stemming from different literary traditions to converge. Thus, comparative literature may play a crucial role in the development and flourishing of different studies by revealing, explaining, and interpreting the artistic value of literary works. As a result, the domain of comparative literature, including literary history and criticism, broadens and deepens.

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