Novel in Between: the Necessity of Semi-Periphery for Peripheral Literature in World Literature

Tina Takapoui
Department of English,
York University
524 Atkinson Building, 4700 Keele St.
Toronto M3J 1P3, ON, Canada
Email: tintak@yorku.ca

Abstract:

Diasporic narratives live a nomadic existence, wandering in the in-between space of core and periphery, with the final destination to be somewhere, at best, closest to the core and, due to the transnational cultural different, what we may call Semi-Periphery. Mandanipour combines the semiotics of words and forms to showcase the unattainability of the core literature for a diasporic process of thinking, subjects, and forms, all of which still function under erasure and censorship.

This paper is going to study the resistance of a diasporic narrative, which both defies and is defied by the standard sets of the core of world literature. It focuses on the resistance is shown by the simultaneously present mechanics of typing and process of thinking in Shahriar Mandanipour's *Censoring of an Iranian Love Story: A Novel*.

Keywords: censorship, hybridity, liminality diaspora literature, translation, readership, core/periphery, being under erasure, publicity, transnationality, cultural dialogue.

> . . . There are those rare moments when the shadows and the naked bodies of the writer and the words, in one time frame of the story, in one setting of the story, are coupled. They become two lovers who have long known each other and who in their clandestine meetings have frequently concealed their longing for one another.
>
> Shahriar Mandanipour, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*

Shahriar Mandanipour – an Iranian author who is currently living in the United States – initially wrote *Censoring and Iranian Love Story* (*Censoring*) in Farsi. Deciding to leave the original Farsi version unpublished, he sent the English version – translated by Sarah Khalili, a fellow Iranian who is culturally aware of the geopolitics of Iran as a contemporary literary margin – to the market. In the present essay, the reader follows the exodus of the story from its land to the diasporic wanderings through the world literature – the term ironically named as such since it is basically rooted in the Western/North American view towards it – a journey that at times seems impossibly endless. Nonetheless, its final reach at best happens to be not the core, but a diasporic in-between

condition – more open to the hybrid texture of the travelling text – a literary space which is resistant to any solid definition. The novel is decidedly unpublished in the vernacular, Farsi. While avoiding the rigid literary norms of both core and periphery of world literature, the translated version takes the peculiarly Persian problem of censorship to the hybrid zone of diaspora, intending to seek a different audience by voicing out literary innovations in the face of innumerable domestic oppressions and repressions.

There is even no need for literacy at all – Farsi, English, or any other ones for that matter – for the reader to know what the novel is about; the visual rhetoric of the book cover and the semiotics of the typing technique are tell-tale enough (Fig. 1 and 2). *Censoring* is a two-fold story about an author who is making up his mind of whether to write a love story, and the not-yet-written tale of two youths Sara and Dara who are being shaped in the mind of the narrator.[2] On one level, the narrator who happens to be the implied author, i.e. the fictional Mandanipour, struggles to write his tale in such a way that could possibly survive the executing blades of the censor and censorship, and reach the market after the publication; on another level, there is the impossible tale of love which is constantly interrupted in the fictional author's mind.

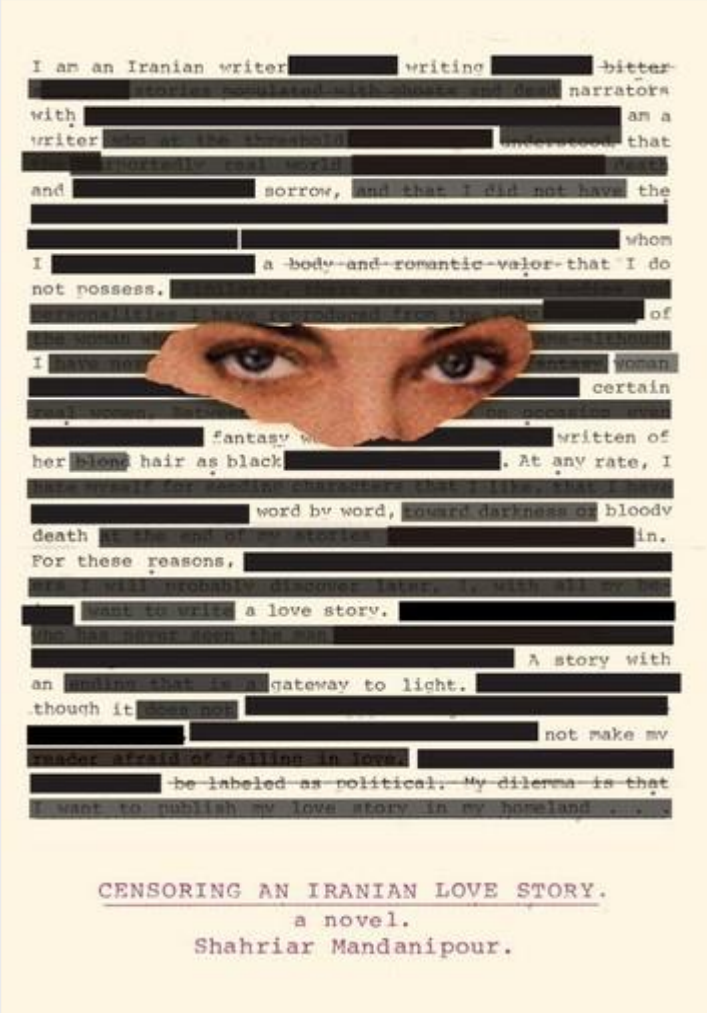
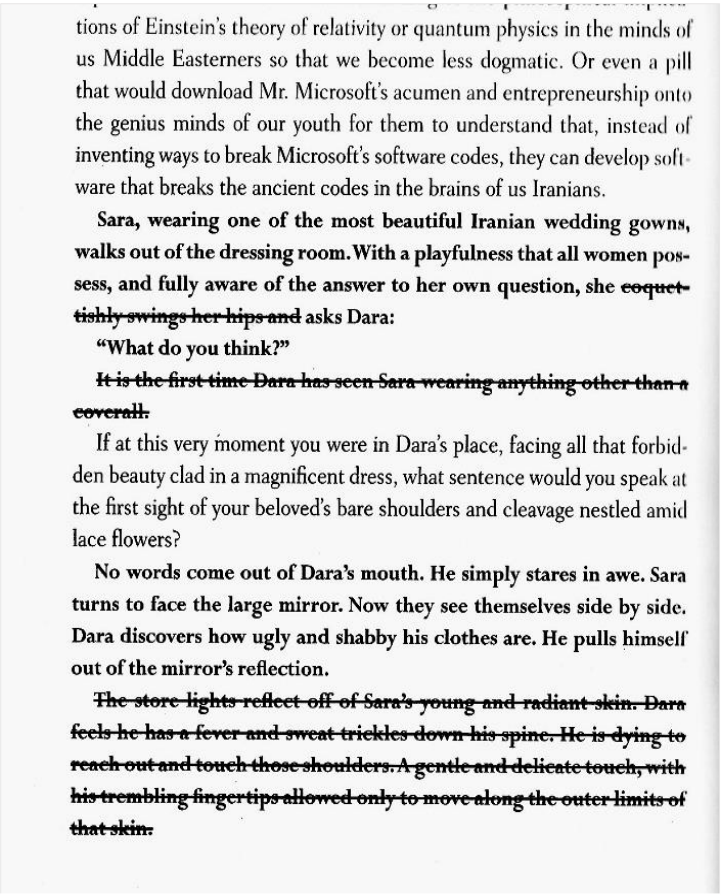


Fig. 1. Book cover as the thematic visual rhetoric containing the two layers of the narrative

In *Censoring*, Mandanipour's main challenge is *language as a whole* and what slips its indifferent and dispassionate system of signification, especially when the text enters the fluid realm of diaspora. Accordingly, the body of the text implies the incomprehensibility of censorship, as a repressive and ideological means, unless one has experienced living under its omnipresent watch. This is especially true for the diasporic reader who has not experienced the ordeals of writing under the guillotine of censorship. In a deconstructive manner, the not-have-penned-yet story manifests



tions of Einstein's theory of relativity or quantum physics in the minds of us Middle Easterners so that we become less dogmatic. Or even a pill that would download Mr. Microsoft's acumen and entrepreneurship onto the genius minds of our youth for them to understand that, instead of inventing ways to break Microsoft's software codes, they can develop software that breaks the ancient codes in the brains of us Iranians.

Sara, wearing one of the most beautiful Iranian wedding gowns, walks out of the dressing room. With a playfulness that all women possess, and fully aware of the answer to her own question, she ~~coquettishly swings her hips and~~ asks Dara:

"What do you think?"

~~It is the first time Dara has seen Sara wearing anything other than a coverall.~~

If at this very moment you were in Dara's place, facing all that forbidden beauty clad in a magnificent dress, what sentence would you speak at the first sight of your beloved's bare shoulders and cleavage nestled amid lace flowers?

No words come out of Dara's mouth. He simply stares in awe. Sara turns to face the large mirror. Now they see themselves side by side. Dara discovers how ugly and shabby his clothes are. He pulls himself out of the mirror's reflection.

~~The store lights reflect off of Sara's young and radiant skin. Dara feels he has a fever and sweat trickles down his spine. He is dying to reach out and touch those shoulders. A gentle and delicate touch, with his trembling fingertips allowed only to move along the outer limits of that skin.~~

Fig. 2. Censorship happening in the mind of the implied author before the existence of the actual text

the immaterial process of thinking which can be lived, but defies the actualization of words. Love is presented in Bold font, as if the mechanics of typing, itself, resists the domestically inevitable condition of censorship under which the expression of love is erased. The thread of the narrator's mind, then, obsessively anticipates how the body of text is going to be torn to pieces, and – before it actually happens – keeps crossing out words after words, and even the sequence of sentences so that it would become more palatable the censor, the executioner of language. In such self-reflexivity, the English reader – if so s/he desires – has the chance to read what is left out from this unfamiliar diaspora of language, and wonder about the absurd tyranny of censorship. Unfortunately, the Farsi reader as the necessary national sacrifice is deprived of the privilege of reading which has driven beyond the borders;[1] it already evanesced once the author refused to have the novel published in vernacular. The novel is aptly out for the non-Iranian reader/critic so that it could display the numerous hurdles a travelling text confronts and needs to overcome, and that its value may be noticed by the determining measures of a global literature which does not really suffer the uncertainty of diasporic literature. For Mandanipour, this seems the only way through which his text shares the experience of being constantly aborted before it is even conceived, that is *being* under erasure. *Censoring* textualizes the possibility of an exilic tale which wishes to find its way into the monopoly of the global core languages, English being the most prominent of all. It enlivens, as nakedly as possible, the issues that a peripheral text confronts on its way to global recognition, from the conception of the idea in author's mind and the mere possibility of thinking it, to its translation which leaves the vernacular out and suffices to a second-hand version of the diasporic textual trauma, to its global acknowledgement. The novel is a testimony, in the face of its severely oppressive condition of writing, to the condition which the problematic standardization of diasporic literature, if not totally blind to, cannot possibly comprehend.

Literature of diaspora is indeed as problematic a discipline as fascinating and liberal it may initially sound. It is the locale where varied divides between the developed and developing countries bolster or

weaken, not only given to their international socio-political relations, but also in terms of the potential of the cultural and literary (mis)communications. The ideal goal is the initiation of dialogue between culturally unfamiliar literatures and readers. On the other hand, there has always been "a variety of complex fundamental issues" that are basically associated with the "traditional hierarchies" in the "opposing forces" between the developing and developed countries," problems that, in terms of literary economics, divide literature into core and diasporic hybridity of periphery (Aydinli & Mathews 2003, 289, 290). Franco Moretti reads the nature of today's literary world as "one and unequal," one in which literary shares of nations and cultures are distributed disproportionately (2000, 54). Naturally, diasporic texts like *Censoring* are engaged with more impediments on their path towards world recognition and readership. One may simply notice the discomforting fissures between the privileged host reader and not-so-much privileged cultural and literary values of home which highlight the unequal chance of success among them. Unfortunately, the lack of equality – similarly determined by both the public readership and diaspora literature as an academic discipline – is measured in terms of the standards which paradoxically only include the Western literary core of global literature. The reality of this unequal contribution turns the publicity of diasporic literature to an insoluble dilemma; its literary values are measured in terms of the standards that are not all-encompassing and by the readers who are geopolitically unaware of the peripheral values strange to their own cultural norms.

The literary dynamic among diasporic nations is imbalanced, and world literature witnesses "very little contribution from the periphery" (Aydinli & Mathews 2003, 297). Language proficiency is an immense impediment for the exiled authors and the émigrés, and when learnt it basically functions as a communicative means. A diasporic text, then, has a very poor chance outside the intermediary agency of translation to communicate with its international readership. Thanks to the local socio-political conditions, a text like *Censoring*, owes the possibility of its being to whether or not it departs from home and lands on the liminality of diaspora, and of course at the unfortunate cost of the home reader. *Censoring* as an uprooted wandering text has no belonging to the soil; it in fact floats on the tides of exilic waves with nowhere to stay on. The problem with a diasporic text as such is that even its *translation* as a hybrid means can never do justice to the vernacular text. We may here pause to consider *The Symphony of the Dead*, the nationally praised novel of the renowned Iranian author Abbas Maroufi (who is currently living a life of exile in Germany), the German version of which became a success, whereas the English one failed to be so. In other words, one may conclude that even for a text to enter the hybridity of diaspora, it is almost necessary for the text "to be rewritten, [and] not translated," owing to the "cultural idiosyncrasies of a world shaped by one linguistic system [which is to transfer] to another language" (Braz 2014, 126, 124). Cultural particularities are at times linguistically inexpressible so far as they are only translated within the linguistic system of signification, and in this regard, translation fails to domesticate and familiarize the unknown. What it can do at best, is to cut ties between the text and its home and give it the liberty to

enter the literary imbalance of the *one and unequal* system, in hope of reaching equilibrium somewhere in-between, a semi-peripheral condition.

In a semi-peripheral space, the vernacular is more restraining than liberating, especially for an author like Mandanipour who means to target a different type of audience for his text. For example, Mandanipour's in-between *Censoring* aims for a market where the "compromise between a western formal influence . . . and local materials" plays a huge role (Moretti 2000, 58):

> [*Censoring*] had to have been written with an audience outside of Iran in mind, but in a language that this audience would mostly not understand; it depends on translation for its being, yet its being is thoroughly Iranian, lovingly and allusively so, dense with local reference. And it takes as its subject exactly these paradoxes, for it is explicitly about what can and cannot be written in contemporary Iranian fiction. (Wood 2009)

Such a paradoxical texture is essential destiny of both the diasporic author and text; they both remain in the local culture, but neither the former can express what they mean, nor the latter be expressed. Meaning is expressed in another language, but it is never experienced as such. Translation, thus, turns English to a currency, a medium by which the Anglophone reader and the novel can communicate. It functions "like the dollar in economics," a metaphor standing for the value of literary works like *Censoring* as the system's commodities (Moretti 2003, 76).

The one and unequal system of diaspora ideally accepts every nation from all around the world as participants; however as Moretti describes it, the absence of equality manifests itself in the form of "geographically-based divides between developed and developing" core and margin which "must be bridged" in the diasporic dialogue with each other (Aydinli & Mathews 2003, 289). On the other hand, world literature, appropriated from the world-system of economic history, has a lot to do with the capitalist values in an economic sense. Today, measured by such values – basically measured and *globally* standardized in and by the core – national literatures are interpreted as being "one-sided and narrow-minded" (Moretti 2000, 55). By the same token, these values may even put more pressure on the peripheral diasporic/exilic – and in our case, Iranian – authors who are already challenging the socio-political red-flags raised by the totalitarian governments, even long before their works are domestically published. Accordingly, while innovative techniques could be voluntary options for the Western authors, they are imperatives for the diasporic counterparts who want to think outside the box and get round the impeding hurdles that constantly confront every single word which is/is going to be penned.

We must bear in mind that the field of "translation is never just about language" but "also very much about cultural politics;" and the veiled cultural sense of the words are not always easily transferred (Braz 2014, 130). For this reason and in addition to the high dependence upon the linguistic manoeuvring in translation, there is "always a point where the study of diaspora must yield to the specialist of the national literature" from which the text arises (Moretti 2003, 66). Moreover,

some, like Mandanipour, feel the necessity of moving *beyond the boundaries* of "translingual practices" and innovatively engage various semiotic significations to their texts for the world reader to better "understand great political dramas" that happen in the world of their works (Moretti 2003, 80).

Obviously, the challenges towards world recognition start long before the idea of *world* is even planted in the mind of the peripheral writer. In a society governed by an anxious totalitarian regime like Islamic Republic, censorship is an unyielding problem before anything is penned. The constant negation of daily repression has long been the most frequently applied strategy instead of solving the problem, and consequently, the critique turns to a ricocheted accusation: "'there are some . . . [who] accuse us of censorship," so said Mohsen Parviz, the Iranian deputy minister of cultural affairs in 2008 (Atwood 2012, 39). In Iran, under the dogma of the theocratic regime, "one which has established itself on war and violence," censorship is not simply limited to writing; it is broadly effective as "a lived experience . . . [and] a collective trauma" of everyone's day to day life (38, 41). Consequently, the nature of words becomes essentially slippery; accusations are answered by threats, and the whole problem eventually gets caught in an endless spiral till the complainant forgets what the problem initially was. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution is concerned about moral and ethical destabilization in vastly different issues, from dress code to literary publications; but there is no clear-cut law regarding the demarcations of the boundaries in any of the areas. Somewhere in the Kafkaesque Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, there sits a person – or at best an assembly – *morally* responsible for reading the literary texts and subjectively deciding on the extent of their corruptibility or appropriateness for publication. Naturally, the artist and intellectual, frustrated by the herculean process of obtaining the permit for publication, longs for a crossing over such boundaries and getting around the absurd procedure, one which is no less horrifying than the Medieval Inquisition. While "the author cannot think freely" in a context where he is to reconcile his own creativity and the censor's oppression, it becomes the "censor's job to ensure that they never do" (41). The anticipation and reality of censorship paralyzes the tale teller's mind, hand, and mouth; they turn the process to a self-reflexive, internalization of lingual mutilation.

On the other hand, the "traditional hierarchies . . . [of both] core and periphery," are reluctant to loosen up the grip on alternative, cross-boundaries worldviews (Aydinli & Mathews 2003, 290). Susan Strange harshly criticizes the core – mainly American – scholars for being "deaf and blind to anything [that is] not published in the USA," and Moretti, in a broader sense, finds the literary core "completely ignor[ing]" the diasporic contributions (qtd. in Aydinli & Mathews 2003, 291; Moretti 2000, 56). One must consider that world literary system is an essentially "political phenomenon as [much as] an aesthetic one," besides the hegemony of languages where a peripheral literature highly depends upon how (un)biased the receptivity of the core may be (Braz 2014, 119). Literary system is an intricate ensemble of traditions, cultures, and multicultural relations into which a peripheral text enters with difficulty, not just because of the linguistic barriers, but for the socio-political and cultural ones. The entrance is further conditioned by the pre-conceived images of the West on peripheral cultures which are "predominantly shaped by extraliterary concern[s]" (Rosa qtd. in Braz 2014, 130). Likewise, what has

been desired by the core to be reflected in contemporary peripheral literature, in our case about the post-Islamic Revolution Iranian society has been almost only limited to the lowbrow culture, the image of families who constantly struggle for their economic, ethical, and moral survival. If such desire is not met, the text has almost no chance of winning the required attention from the core.

However, not everything is as disappointing as it seems; the peripheral repressive machine, the core's biased taste, and self-censorship can all lead the author to innovative ways in which the author, narrator, and the reader cope with "realities of control and censorship" and apply other signifying codes to communicate together creatively (Atwood 2012, 40). Mandanipour's narrator's voice and comments provide the necessary fluidity for the peripheral text to flow into the tides of world literature, and when translated, enforce an overall "recontextualization of the source text by creating a receiving intertext that replaces relations to the source literature with relations to literary traditions in the receiving culture that a reader of the translation must possess" (Venuti 185). Such a shift of associations is made via the novel's typography, i.e. the crosses over the lines of the Sara and Dara's love story, which moves beyond the linguistic signification and relates with the world reader in a visual context, the space which belongs neither to the core, nor to the periphery of language as such.

Naturally, for the author who resorts to extra-linguistic innovations, it is necessary to locate anywhere other than the discomforting comfort zone of their homeland; this is where the lure of the semi-periphery comes as a way out – although as another Iranian author in exile, Abbas Maroufi, reminds us about the most basic challenges the writer on the run faces: "an author in exile, running for his life, is cut off from his daily bread, his name, and his foremost concern now turns to how to survive from one day to another" (16:45-17:10). Yet, all considered and having moved beyond what Maroufi contends, the way to the core and world recognition seems possible through an in-between space, the semi-periphery which is necessarily a different geographical space from the writer's homeland. It is an "amorphous" zone between the "unambiguous core-periphery patterns" and is characterized by containing the "residual . . . Or transitional" material of either of the two (Derruder 2008, 91). This in-betweenness does not literally overlap on a specific geographic location; it is, in other words, some place like a Deleuzian deterritorialized one on which boundaries get endlessly formed and reformed. As the seabed of mutation and hybridity, it facilitates the voice of the author fading into the words of the translator, and a national concern being expressed in a *world* language. Uprooted from its land, the work grows into a thing which has no solid sense of belonging; it grows to be a *world thing*. Imagination finds ways out of either core or peripheral restraints – those like what *Censoring* shares with the reader – and "move[s] in several directions" in hope of an entrance into the core of the literary tides (Moretti 2003, 75). The benefit will be providing, for peripheral voices, some space as a locus where cultures and words become fluid and move "in and out of the core," where "innovation may arise . . . then be captured and diffused by the core of the core" (77, 78).

Censoring efforts to slip the dictates of the peripheral censor; just as the two lovers eventually break free from the authority of the fictional author, it is "an escape from the hegemony of censored lives – whether it is characters' lives censored by authors, authors' lives censored by a government,

or books'" (Ostby 2013, 93). Such practices are made possible in the form "of a transnational, transhistorical alliance" in an in-between condition, moving away from the peripheral corner and located elsewhere which is not solidly dominated by the hegemony of the core (93). Ostby (2013) suggests that only in a:

> . . . decentered state of cultural divorce from its author, can an argument be made for the 'exported' contemporary Iranian novel-memoir hybrid as a literary space for unique dialogic performances of context-specific affective transnational appeal. (93)

Eventually, peripheral literature as such, planted under the restricting censorship and constant observation of thought, necessarily comes to fruition in a climate other than the writer's homeland. For a peripheral author, like Mandanipour, "an Iranian writer tired of writing dark and bitter stories, stories populated by ghosts and dead narrators with predictable endings of death and destruction" – looks forward to a semi-periphery as the closes condition to the ideal, for the translation of what he creates, and chooses a different reader to share with, an unstoppable pen under the noose of the censorship (Mandanipour 2009, 7). Translation without the original text, for him, becomes the space in which text, divorced from the ideological and geopolitical fuss around both core and periphery, may survive the guillotine of censor and censorship.

Endnotes:

1. Here I am referring to the etymological meaning of *diaspora* which is "driving beyond boundaries" (Baraheni 2006, 39).
2. The names Sara and Dara are taken from our pre- and shortly post-revolution first grade Farsi books whose pictures were after a while covered, gradually disappeared and were finally substituted by Islamic names, Amin and Akram in later years! Figure 3 shows two pictures on the top that were published in 1978, and two others on the bottom published in the Post-Revolution 1985. The unveiled children in the top two were given Persian names: Sara (the girl) and Dara (the boy), and the veiled ones on the bottom two Arabic/Islamic ones: Akram (the girl) and Amin (the boy).

Fig. 3. First-Grade Farsi course book's brothers and sisters

References:

Atwood, Blake. "Sense and Censorship in Islamic Republic of Iran." *World Literature Today* 86.3 (2012): 38-41.

Aydinli, Ersel; Mathews, Julie. "Are Core and Periphery Irreconcilable? The Curious World of Publishing in Contemporary International Relations." *International Studies Perspectives* 1. 3 (2003): 289-303.

Baraheni, Reza. "Exilic Readings of the *Old Testament*, the *New Testament*, and the *Koran*." *Muslim Diaspora: Gender, Culture, and Identity*. (Ed.) Haideh Moghissi. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006. 39-53.

Braz, Albert. "Chosen Literature: Core Languages, Core Languages, Peripheral Languages, and the World Literary System". *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 47. 4 (2014): 119-134.

Derruder, Ben. "Beyond the State: Mapping the Semi-Periphery through Urban Networks." *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 14. 4 (2008): 91-119.

"First Grade Farsi Course Book's Brothers and Sisters through Time." Eghtedar Press. http://www.eghtedarpress.com/1395/07/05/6412. Date of Access: 1 December, 2019.

Mandanipour, Shahriar. *Censoring an Iranian Love Story: A Novel,* trans. Sarah Khalili. New York: Knopf, 2009.

Maroufi, Abbas. *How Can Iranian Novel Become World Novel.* BBC Persian. (2011). *Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqCxRkbZNbo.*

Moretti, Franco. "Conjectures on World Literature." *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54-68.

Moretti, Franco. "More Conjectures." *New Left Review* 20 (2003): 73-81.

Ostby, Marie. "De-censoring an Iranian-American "Memoir": Authorship and Synchronicity in Shahriar Mandanipour's *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*." Iranian Studies 46. 1 (2013): 73-93.

Venuti, Lawrence. "World Literature and Translation Studies." *The Routledge Companion to World Literature.* (Eds.) Theo D'haen , David Damrosch , Djelal Kadir. New York and London: Routledge, 2011. 180-193.

Wood, James. "Love, Iranian Style." *The New Yorker*. 22 June (2009). URL: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/06/29/love-iranian-style.