Inquiring "tree of life" at home: Persian classic literature in English classes

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ABSTRACT: The recent decades of English Language Teaching (ELT) appear to be particularly concerned with the marginalisation caused by English linguistic, cultural, and academic colonisation and imperialism. Bold footprints of this academic monopoly can be seen in the wide incorporation of abridged or unabridged British and American literary works in foreign language settings. Such literary products are often legitimised as authentic materials authored by native speakers. Inspired by the idea of incorporating non-native literature and translated first language literature into English classes, the authors of this article sought to explore the possibilities of opening spaces for English translations of Persian classic works of literature in English as foreign language classrooms and tracing the language events that unfolded as a result of incorporating such literature. The participants of this two-semester long action research project were non-English major Iranian female university students, majoring in various fields at Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran. The sense of familiarity the students had with such national literary works led to the emergence of language instances lightened by sparks of virtue, vision, life and art.

KEYWORDS: Academic imperialism, art, life, Persian classic literature, virtue, vision.

INTRODUCTION

The 13th-century Persian Poet, Mowlana Jalal-al-Din Rumi (1207–1273 AD), in one of his poems, *Tree of Life*, narrates the story of a messenger who in running an errand for a king is sent to India to find a mysterious tree whose fruits grant immortality. For years, this man desperately wanders around, from town to town, seeking this mysterious tree, but nowhere does he find it, nor a clue or trace of it. Feeling fed up and disappointed with false directions and rumours, he eventually decides to depart that foreign land and leave his mission unaccomplished. On his way back home, he happens to meet a spiritual man at a halting-place. He goes to him in despair and opens up his heart. Having listened to his adventures, the sage tells him how he has been mistaken all this time since the so-called "tree", which can have a thousand other names, is "knowledge"—pouring out from divine fountain—through which "a million things arise" including everlasting life, and without which the person is a lifeless corpse. The sage says:

Hey simple-brain,
This tree is knowledge which the mystics gain.
It's the most tall, wide, and expansive tree;
It's Water of Life from God's boundless sea.
You looked for the tree's form, so in the end
You picked no fruit of inner truth, my friend.
In fact, it's only sometimes called "a tree"—
At other times it's "sun", "cloud", or "the sea";
From that one source a million things arise,
With immortality its smallest prize… (Mathnavi, Book II / 3683-3692)[1].

As a community of Iranian researchers involved in the disciplines of English Language Teaching (ELT), Persian Literature and Islamic History, we have at times drawn analogies between Rumi's *Tree of Life* and the mission, we, as non-native teachers, are accomplishing in the wonderland of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL).

Living in an age in which English has carved a well-established niche as the language of global economy, science, mass media, business, technology, and the like, we, as speakers of *other* languages, have come to feel a pressing demand to address this disadvantage by having a share of this target language. Turning such demand into an advantage, native American and British publishers—traditionally legitimised as authorities for producing expert discourses and setting norms and standards for English usage —are seen to play a pivotal role in churning out flamboyant packages of language teaching and learning products and delivering them to diverse, targeted consumers, including Iranian language teachers and learners. Through this lens, language appears to resemble a tradable, market-wise commercial "commodity", with "exchange value" (Tan & Rubdy, 2008, p. 2) and "economic cachet" (Wee, 2008, p. 37), which is likely to provide its investors, shareholders, and marketers with a lucrative payoff (Gong & Holliday, 2013; Gray, 2010a; 2010b & 2013; Heller, 2010; Poorsaduqi, 2013; Tan & Rubdy, 2008).

Despite the existing endorsement of imported language products, such materials have been criticised on several grounds. Though debates on the topic abound, among the critically observed issues is the salience of knowledge constructs, interests, norms, values, and worldviews that are almost Western or Eurocentric in nature, and selling them to the rest of the world "as if they were universal" (Asante, 2012, p. 35), and in fact at the expense of local knowledge constructs. This hegemony has been conceptualised under complicated notions of linguistic, cultural, intellectual or academic imperialism or colonisation in a broader socio-political and historical scope (Bhatt, 2005; Canagarajah, 2005; Pennycook, 2010).

As argued, one of the lingering legacies of deference to Eurocentric knowledge is the creation of a sense of contempt, inferiority or worthlessness towards local sources knowledge and wisdom (Asante, 2012; Bhatt, 2005; Kumaravadivelu, 2006), whereby individuals become the consumers, rather than producers of their own knowledge. In other words, the dominated consumers are paralyzed not only by their reliance on others but also by what Kumaravadivelu (2006) calls "self-marginalisation" as they

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[1] Translated by Mojaddedi (2007, p. 216)

"knowingly or unknowingly legitimise the characteristics of inferiority attributed to them by the dominating group" (p. 22).

Among other disciplines, English literature is a domain in which bold footprints of academic imperialism and marginalisation of local knowledge have been traced. The fact that a substantial body of literary works used in English as Foreign Language (EFL) courses is written in native or standard English and limited to mono-cultural, Western or Eurocentric literature has raised voices against the neglect or rarity of non-native varieties of English (Floris, 2005; Kachru, 1999; Talib, 1992; Vethamani, 1996). According to Sridhar (1983), non-native literatures include literary texts and creative writings in English produced by its non-native users, particularly those coming from "former British colonies, such as the countries in the Indian subcontinent, in East and West Africa, and in the Caribbean" (p. 291).

However, during the last two decades and with the increasing numbers of non-native speakers and the development of Englishes around the world—each having its own structural features, lexis, phonology, pragmatics, and discourse practices—some have recognised that solely adhering to stable forms, norms, models, and standards of the BANA (standing for Britain, Australasia, and North America) is not only mythical but also problematic (Cook, 2007; Matsuda, 2009; Sifakis & Sougari, 2003).

One line of argument, also followed in this paper, is that literature teaching should not be limited to mono-cultural, Eurocentric literature. Speaking defensively, the Indian linguist, Kachru (1999, p. 148) states that non-native literary texts—also called "new literatures", "colonial and post-colonial literature", or "contact literature"—are "a repertoire of resources for providing linguistic and cross-cultural explanations as they reveal how English can be redefined in non-Western contexts and how language and culture are interrelated" (cited in Nault, 2006, p. 323). Likewise, Kachru and Smith (2008) argue that the variety of cultural contexts, themes, genres, rhetorical strategies, patterns of verbal interactions, and meaningful signs contained in non-native works of literature can raise awareness and consciousness of the readers. In a practical case, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* list examples of attempts made by formerly colonised African writers to avoid an approved variety of Standard English by creating a national English. Their non-translated words create linguistic gaps, which require readers to "accept and understand the native culture on its own terms" (cited in Jaffar, 2005, p. 101).

Extending non-native literature to translated first language literature, Ronald Gray (2005) maintains that "one excellent but frequently overlooked type of literature is the translated first language literature of the students" (p. 2). He mentions several additional advantages such works carry over other types of literature. They include greater contiguity with the cultural identity or heritage of the students and the existence of more familiar characters, themes, plots, values, and linguistic elements. His voice is not an isolated one. Selin Yasmin (2008), a Muslim literary critic, argues that literature from the Muslim countries is rare in the realm of World Englishes. She laments: "Even in the Muslim universities of Muslim countries, English literature is taught, leaving out Islamic literature" (p. 3). Floris (2005) also states that exclusive focus on the standard variety of English is likely to prevent "our learners [from] enjoying and experiencing the wealth of the new varieties of English" (p. 46). She

points to the findings of some studies in South Asian countries which suggest that students face difficulties in dealing with and comprehending native literary texts as they are often loaded with cultural complexities with which students are unfamiliar. As an alternative, she provides guidelines for dealing with literary works written by Asian writers in English and indicates that the relevance of these types of Asian literary texts to students' collective identity and their familiar settings render them potential assets.

Talib (1992), a researcher from Singapore, argues that Singaporean literary texts written in English are likely to help non-native students to develop a sense of cultural identity and belonging. As an example, he refers to *The Taximan's Story*, an English story created by a Singaporean writer (Catherine Lim) in which features of Singaporean English are reflected in the whole text, and explains how it can be used as a possible resource for teaching English in Singapore. In yet another example, three Indonesian researchers, Muslim, Nafisah, and Damayanti (2009) recount how the majority of stories incorporated in Indonesian high school-level English textbooks are foreign ones "such as *Cinderella*, *Goldy Locks*, *Snow White*, and *Sleeping Beauty*" (p. 14). They state that one of the reasons for the salience of foreign literary works is that textbook writers find it difficult to translate local literature into good English, thus preferrin to pick up available foreign stories. They are emphatic that English translations of local stories can make students feel proud of their country, history, and culture, as a predominately Muslim one, and help them to "visualize or prove what they have found or read in the stories in their daily life. This makes learning more meaningful to them" (p. 10).

Locally speaking, Iranian language teachers and learners are not unfamiliar with such issues. Re-reading the same sugar-coated story of imported international ELT products widely used in the Iranian English language institutes and in academia, a good number of local studies have pointed to the salience of topics imbued with the lifestyle and ideology of the West, namely capitalism, materialism, neo-liberalism, consumerism, and individualism (Abdollahzadeh & Baniasad, 2010; Baleghizadeh & Motahed, 2010; Keshavarz & Akbari Malek, 2009; Koosha, Talebinezhad, & Taki, 2004). This in turn has raised concerns with regard to the nature of foreign language knowledge absorbed, consumed and re-produced by Iranian language teachers and learners, as well as the extent to which such depicted life worlds are representatives of socio-cultural realities, norms or priorities lived daily by the individuals in the Iranian contexts. Among others, two Iranian researchers, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) maintain that:

> [t]eaching the English language to learners who bring with themselves a confluence of political, social, historical, cultural and religious backgrounds to the ELT classrooms may not be fully accomplished through mere exposure and blatant ballyhoos of the Western culture which is prevalent in the *market* of their English teaching materials (p. 66).

From a broader perspective, the issue of national identity and the need for the lived experiences and social identities of language learners to be incorporated into the second language curricula are recently receiving considerable attention. A number of Iranian writers (Ashoori, 1997; Hajiyani, 2009), while avoiding dogmatic nationalism, see Iranian identity as consisting of four indexes named as nationality (or Iranian-ness), religion (mainly Islam), traditions (or customs), and modernity. They believe

that these indexes need to be taken into consideration when designing educational curricula.

Turning the spotlight on teaching literary works, one can see a wide incorporation of abridged or unabridged British and American literary works such as short stories, poems, dramas, and novels in the Iranian foreign language settings (Azizi, 2014). Such literary works are often legitimised as presenting "standard" or "native" varieties of English. In objecting to the current hegemony of native speakerism, Khatib, Ranjbar, and Fat'hi (2012) propose that the literature in foreign language classes should include multicultural and multinational literary works. They also warn that "becoming too preoccupied with monocultural literature … will culminate into more linguistic imperialism, self-marginalisation, self-alienation, cultural colonialisation and hegemony" (p. 12).

While the importance of taking seriously attempts to confront and alleviate "the harshness of all marginalisations Iranians have suffered for centuries" (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2012, p. 68) has been voiced, few remedial undertakings have been reported. In one rare instance, Azizi (2014) observed that the large number of storybooks which are published in Iran for English language learners and used in the language institutes are based on either American or British literature. She argues that the Persian literary heritage, as an invaluable source, has thus far been disregarded. Consequently, she worked to recreate a number of English narratives based on Persian classic stories taken from *Mathnavi* and *Shahnameh* for EFL courses. On another level, she sought English teachers' perceptions on using English texts out of Persian stories. On the one hand, the majority of interviewed teachers stated that "the familiar content which makes the text more comprehensible for Iranian learners causes more emotional and intellectual engagement in learners" (p. 130) and they "can provide learners with models of how topics…frequent in the lives of Iranians are expressed in English" (p. 131). On the other hand, some teachers expressed their worries about the complicated or possibly inaccurate language of the texts, which might hamper English language learning.

Recognising the need to design educational literary programs which can "talk back" to the present academic monopoly, we, as researchers from different disciplines, sought to explore how Persian classic literary works could be prepared for English language classes, and how they might inspire the language re/created by the students. Regrettably, despite the richness of our Muslim Iranian culture and its world renowned artistic and literary heritage, there have rarely been serious attempts to capitalise on this richness; neither has this potential been drawn on for foreign language teaching or to explore how such roots might invigorate our English language teaching and learning practices. We believed that like the messenger in Rumi's story, we need to take deeper stock of our mission, and seek the tree we are searching in our vicinity, maybe at home, through trees of knowledge rooted in our divinely-oriented knowledge. We, like Rumi, hope that from that one source a million things would flourish.

Before narrating the journey, we briefly outline the history of English teaching in Iran.

English language teaching in Iran

The position of Iran, as an Islamic, anti-western country, has resulted in noticeable challenges with regard to English language teaching. English has been the most significant foreign language in Iran for the last 50 years. During the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), due to pro-Western policies and the close political, social, economic, and military relationship between Iran's kings (Shah) and British and American companies and institutions, English—as the language of Modernity—was selected as the foreign language of the country. During the years following the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979–present), the teaching of English was dealt with ambivalently. Initially, English was viewed as the language of the enemy (i.e. the United States and England) whose spread could threaten the national and Islamic identity of the country. However, the idea of "exporting the Islamic revolution to the rest of the world" (Sharifian, 2010, p. 139) as well as the need for access to scientific, economic, and technological development references made the presence of English a practical necessity.

This necessity, coupled with the desire to maintain the national culture and values, led to attempts to write locally made textbooks which could address the English language needs of Iranian students. Within a centralised system of education, English textbooks prepared by Iranian authorities in the national curriculum committee and Ministry of Education have been assigned for junior high school, high school, and pre-university levels. Adherence to the assigned textbook is guaranteed by a standardised testing scheme issued by the central office. A glance over the textbooks suggests that their major focus is on reading skills, vocabulary learning, and grammar. The inability of public schools and universities in meeting the communicative needs of Iranian learners has resulted in the mushrooming of an astonishing number of English private and semi-private language institutes in many cities. In the private sector, cutting-edge, imported textbooks, published mainly by international publishing centres form the backbone of instruction in a good number of language institutes. Seeing imported foreign textbooks as sources for disseminating covert and overt socio-political ideologies and cultural values, local researchers have been seen to turn a critical eye on such teaching and learning materials. The salience of topics such as American lifestyle, festivals and ceremonies, eating habits and Hollywood celebrities, as well as Western cultural values or living standards that are at variance with the realities, local specifications, and real-life concerns of Iranian language teachers and learners have been reported frequently (Abdollahzadeh & Baniasad, 2010; Baleghizadeh & Motahed, 2010; Kazemi, Asadi Aidinlou, Savaedi, & Alaviniya, 2013; Keshavarz & Akbari Malek, 2009; Koosha, Talebinezhad, & Taki, 2004; Poorsaduqi, 2013). With that orientation, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) see language institutes in Iran as being responsible for current "marginalisation and identity loss" as they keep "indirectly smoothing the way for the maintenance of the status quo, i.e. the dominance of the Western culture in an Iranian and Islamic context, under the guise of competitiveness and professionalism" (p. 65).

As a point of departure, this investigation capitalises on English translations of seminal Persian classic literary texts, instead of foreign American or British literary products including widely-used commercial textbooks.

METHOD

This research was conducted by three academics from ELT, Persian Literature and Islamic History disciplines and a doctoral candidate of TEFL, all from the same institution. Our collaborative venture laid the foundations of an interdisciplinary action research project in which one of the researchers was responsible for conducting classroom actions and reporting the results to other co-researchers. At the outset of the journey, we made lists of Persian works of literature that could feature in our program. From among available options, we focused on three major masterpieces, namely *Mathnavi Couplets* composed by Jalal Al-Din Rumi (1207-1273 AD), *The Epic of Kings* by Abolqasem Ferdowsi (977-1010 AD) and *Conference of the Birds* by Farid Al-Din Attar (1145-1221 AD). The rationale for choosing these literary works was their narrative-like, allegorical structure as well as the deep, thought-provoking implicit and explicit moral messages they offered. The quality and richness of the poems' content, their attraction and appeal to the assumed readers, their interpretability, and their relevance to learners' everyday personal and social lives (Azizi, 2014) were the four criteria we applied in selecting the stories.

With a shortlist of poems gradually being prepared, we spent more time preparing them for classroom practices, mainly through adopting or adapting prose narrations of such poems. In occasions when the available abridged prose narratives employed extensive, archaic vocabulary or sophisticated literary styles of writing, we simplified and streamlined the available translations. To simplify the texts, we used common simplification techniques such as replacing uncommon or difficult words with more familiar synonyms, replacing complex syntactic structures with simpler ones, splitting long sentences into multiple sentences, dropping and adding some parts while trying to keep the content and meaning intact. Below is an example of an original paragraph translated by Whinfield (1979) and the prepared simplified version:

> In the book of Kalila and Damna a story is told of a lion who held all the beasts of the neighborhood in subjection, and was in the habit of making constant raids upon them, to take and kill such of them as he required for his daily food. At last the beasts took counsel together, and agreed to deliver up one of their company every day, to satisfy the lion's hunger, if he, on his part, would cease to annoy them by his continual forays (p. 14).

The simplified version:

> There was once a lion that harmed and harassed other beasts of the neighborhood and was in the habit of attacking and killing them for his daily food. Being fed up with his attacks, the beasts took counsel together, and agreed to deliver up one of themselves every day, to satisfy the lion's hunger, if he, on his part, would agree to stop hunting them.

Moreover, since the prepared narratives were meant to act not only as classroom content but as springboards for further learning events and actions, we spent more time negotiating how they could be livened up. In designing such language events, we were determined not to imitate conventional drill-like language practices (e.g., true/false, multiple choice, matching, gap-filling, sentence completion exercises) which could present a mechanical view of language nor the more communicative ones (e.g., opinion-gap, information-gap, and reasoning-gap tasks) which could eventually

create artificial, life-detached activities. What we wanted was for literature to be experienced as "artworks" rather than a means for delivering narratives as top-down, factual pieces of information such as summaries of plots and themes. Accordingly, our classroom events were meant to provide space for the individual learners to actualise their linguistic and non-linguistic potential and develop their creativity.

With our hopes that classrooms should be sites for deeper self-recognition, we routed our journey from a miniature picture of self (I in contact with myself and others) towards a broader picture of self (I in contact with the world around me and the world beyond). Given that itinerary, our journey commenced with a number of stories whose deep moral and mystical concepts and symbolic characters and events set the grounds for going back to the inner self and examining the idea of who we are in a more complex way.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND PARTICIPANTS

During our two-semester long research project (from October 2012 to June 2013), we were with five different communities of learners majoring in various fields including Logic & Philosophy, Social Studies, Management, Industrial Engineering and Computer Engineering at Alzahra University, an accredited state university in north of Tehran, Iran. The number of students varied from thirty to fifty in each community. They were young Iranian women, mainly in their late teens or early twenties. Nearly all these students had gained entry to this university after passing the Iranian University Entrance Exam (Konkoor). Despite Persian being the main medium of instruction for university courses, all non-English major students are required to enroll in a prerequisite three-unit general English course, which lasts approximately 26 ninety-minute sessions.

In each community, we had a range of students with regard to their backgrounds in general as well as to their English language experiences in particular. While some of the students had already studied English in private language institutes for years and enjoyed a fairly good command of English (intermediate and above), others did not have much experience with English beyond school.

Both during and after the teaching of the courses, the written transcripts of classroom conversations, participants' in-and-out-of-class documents including their reflective notes, and PowerPoint presentation slides, final exam papers, and surveys enabled us to analyse the events in more details. We analysed the data by clustering ideas into major themes and labeling them according to the language use of the participants. Accordingly, our examples and the discussions which follow are rooted in the language taken up or created by the learners. To maintain a sense of naturalness, students' speech and writing remain largely unedited and intact, but anonymous, with minor typographical corrections done for the sake of clarity.

In this article, we aim to recount a number of language events that blossomed as a result of exposure to Persian works of literature. What needs to be underscored is that the coming language events, coded with the suffix "lit", are not separate, exclusive categories of events but rather fairly overlapping ones.

Although the present research did not aim to conduct a rigorous examination of ELT materials, the contents of three internationally-used ELT reading textbooks including *Active Skills for Reading* 1 by Neil J. Anderson, *Cover to Cover: Reading Comprehension and Fluency* 1 by Richard R. Day and Junko Yamanka, and *Pre-intermediate Select Readings* by Linda Lee and Erik Gundersen were focused narrowly. The selection of these books was based on recommendations from university teachers who commonly used these books for the same General English courses in the same institution, as well as the textbooks' wide readership by other Iranian university students and instructors. A selected number of texts was examined and their stated or implied values were juxtaposed or compared against the themes presented in the designed Persian narratives.

The findings of the study revealed that the sense of familiarity the students had with such national literary works led to the emergence of language instances lightened by sparks of virtue, vision, life, and art. These language events are discussed below.

"Heart full of flaming love": Virtue-lit language

With the availability of various Persian narratives, a good ground was established for analysing the salient themes they offered and comparing them with a number of topics of the same category covered in three internationally used reading textbooks. The analysis demonstrated that "inward self" versus "outward self" and "individualism" versus "collectivism" were key points of difference.

The concept of the soul was one of the mainstays of a number of Persian narratives and parables shared with various communities of the students. This issue is presented differently through different symbolic stories. One of these eventful, soul-focused stories was *Conference of the Birds* by Farid Al-Din Attar (1145–1221). Through this allegorical story, the poet tells the story of "the birds in the world" that are encouraged by their leader, Hoopoe, to start a journey in search of their king—Simorgh. Having heard of the difficulties of the route, a number of the birds (such as the nightingale, parrot, peacock, duck, partridge, owl and sparrow) are filled in with terror and express their inability to accompany Hoopoe through this journey. Hoopoe confronts them one by one and warns that it is better to lose their life than to languish miserably. With a change of heart, the birds set on a journey which requires them to cross over seven deadly valleys. Finally, out of thousands of birds, only thirty birds reach the dwelling place of Simorgh, but as they enter his court, all they find is a lake in which they see their own reflection. Beneath its allegorical, fable-like surface, the narrative is indeed talking about complex issues with regard to internal connectedness to God and divinity. Significantly, the poet uses the birds to symbolise human beings and their spirits or failings and the Persian pun *thirty* (si) *birds* (morgh) and Simorgh to suggest that the birds and Simorgh are one and the same. The whole story is the mystical journey of souls.

The underlying meaning conveyed by this story and other similar narratives is that human beings—irrespective of their status, position, talent and preparedness—need to ponder the reason and truth of creation and existence, consider God in each and every aspect and conduct of their short-lived lives, have sincerity, wholeheartedness, zeal and depth in their faith, and make practical efforts to attain virtue. Such teachings are derived from Islamic principles—as represented in the holy Quran and the sayings of

the Prophet and the Imams. In the holy Quran, God has frequently and emphatically drawn the attention of individuals to the soul, and the necessity of persistently attempting to cleanse the heart of unethical thoughts, viciousness, wrong and wicked deeds that degenerate man to the level of animals. In other words, individuals are strongly advised not to engage with trivial, worldly matters, mundane enjoyments, carnal desires, bodily needs or worthless things so that they can find peace, serenity, and tranquility in their heart.

While going through oral and written reflections made by the students on *Conference of the Birds*, we particularly paid attention to the ways the students were making sense of the story and were putting their thoughts into words. What grabbed our attention was that the students were taking up impressive expressions, chains of words, sentences, or messages from the story and were intermingling them with their own utterances to display their various symbolic understandings of the story. For example, in the Industrial Engineering community, Fatemeh and Parisa borrowed the expression "charming sceneries" from the story and wrote that "the writer wants to say us that we don't be deceived with charming sceneries and we never lose our way and our purpose in life…". Mozhgan and Zeinab wote about how "our life is like a long journey with many problems and to solve these problems and be successful we should be like the thirty birds". Fahimeh had recapped the story in a well-known Persian verse by the famous poet Hafez, as follows:

سال‌ها دل طلب جام جم از ما می‌کرد   آنچه خود داشت ز بی‌گانه تمنا می‌کرد ²

Simply put, the verse indicates that divine knowledge should be sought within the self, rather than outside.

When it came to birds, the students had interestingly related individual birds to various types of humans and their attributes. Zahra took up the expression "shake off the self" from the story and mentioned that to her "the birds that could finish the journey are those know themselves and they are ready to shake off their self to get their goal". Erfaneh and Elham saw the peacock as representing the person who "doesn't believe in himself and doesn't like to progress and have a promotion in his life", and the duck as representing the person who "can't abandon his mundane belongings …".

What we could see was that the story, and the subsequent reflections and discussions, helped a unique spiritual language atmosphere to blossom within our communities. This language was characterised by concepts of "shaking off the self", "soul", "cage of the body", "heart full of flaming love", enduring "difficulties", "abandoning mundane belongings and possessions", "reaching God", not being "deceived by charming sceneries" in this "long journey", "Simorgh", as well as meaningful allusions to Persian poetic verses, Quranic verses, Hadith (the Prophet and Imams' sayings), and the like.

The abundance of spirit-involved expressions in the language instances of the students, regardless of the depth or degree of religious or theological positioning of

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² For years my heart inquired of me
Where Jamshid's sacred cup might be,
And what was in its own possession
It asked from strangers, constantly;

their users, might derive its strength and texture from their inner spiritual beliefs. Or they may resonate from the discourses of spirituality they were in contact with in their immediate social lives including family settings, academic or non-academic institutes, religious ceremonies, rituals, the mass media, and the like. The rootedness of this issue revealed itself more as we could observe how this kind of language kept appearing and flourishing throughout the sessions, like flowers that have more lasting scents. As we traced the unfolding events, we could see how a fair number of students adopted expressions such as "shaking off the self" or "heart full of love" for conveying their inner spiritual feelings in their later talks and consecutive reflections.

This might indicate how such concepts probably touched their hearts or had a more lasting impact on their minds and lives. For example, in the following excerpt produced by Arefeh, nearly half way throughout the course, she revealed how the story had made her come to new realisation of life principles and purposes. She wrote:

> In the hoopoe story, I understood that I didn't know my God in fact after that story I have try to know God and progress my principles… . Before this story my life didn't have purpose and it wasn't good and I didn't keep my mind on God … but nowadays I try to do everything for my purposes (God and best level). I know if I want to find God I shouldn't go another place because God is near … (Written reflection, second semester, Session 15).

Significantly, such language constructions in which the students use their foreign language for expressing their intricate thoughts and feelings about essential issues like spiritual purposes, the importance of the soul, reaching God and the like stand in contrast with the "anesthetized" language developed as a result of engagement with trivial, mundane topics which eventually make the learners think and talk down through shallow issues (Poorsaduqi, 2013).

While there was not much consideration of "inward self" in the three mentioned reading textbooks, there was great concern with "outward self", "personality" and "characteristics". This encompasses various topics including psychological texts about personality types (relationships between personality and blood types; personality and colors; different personality types; character traits; and verbal and non-verbal behaviors). An example of this could be seen in a text entitled "Understanding Ourselves" in *Cover to Cover* 1 in which the personality differences of three sisters, Fei, Meilan and Lihua, are mentioned. Fei is "friendly", "outgoing", "rebellious" and "active". "Meilan is a happy person, but, unlike Fei, she prefers to be alone" and Lihua is "quiet and reserved" and "she doesn't smile or laugh very often", but her friends don't find her "unfriendly". The texts are followed by some arguments about relationship between personality and "blood types" (pp. 114-115).

Another category of texts focused on the self includes interviews with people who talk about their families, jobs, studies, homes, personal ambitions, memories, challenges and adventures. They openly share their feelings or negotiate their problems with experts or consultants and seek their suggestions. Taking that into consideration, John Kullman (2013) sees a "peculiar and partial" Western "discourse of individualism"—which encompasses characteristics of "assertiveness" and "communicativeness"—to demonstrate how "learners' lives, personalities, personal qualities, lifestyles and personal change have become primary foci of the coursebooks" (p. 32). An example of such self-disclosure is presented in *Cover to*

Cover 1, in a text entitled "Just Ask! Ms. Hope answers all of your questions on life". In one part, a boy, Jon introduces himself as a not "very good-looking", "pretty short" and "shy and quiet" person. He is writing to Ms. Hope because he is worried that if he introduces his fiancée to his "best friend", "she will like him better than" him as he is "tall and very good-looking", "funny" and "very much outgoing" (pp. 104-105).

Other texts include instructional strategies, tips or recipes for how to improve your personal or social life, including how to lead a happy life and healthy life style, how to avoid unhealthy diets, how to live longer, how to maintain beauty or keep fit, how to deal with stress, or how to observe etiquette in modern technology.

Though no rigid claims can be made, from the present scenarios, the vision of the self, or the nature of human beings foregrounded appears to fall mainly within an outward picture of self too preoccupied with worldly affairs such as "enjoyment", "money", "fashion", "looking good", "happiness", "public life" and the like. Seemingly a broad ideology governing texts of this sort is a humanistic outlook towards life or existence with inclinations towards a hedonistic worldview in which pleasure and materialistic values are given priority.

Conversely, the concepts of altruism, patriotism, love of country or countrymen and rejection of oppression were seen to be the focal point of a number of Persian narratives. For example, one mythical Persian story, "Kaveh, the Blacksmith" from Ferdowsi's *Epic of Kings* narrates the story of Kaveh, a blacksmith, who saved the Iranian nation by killing the cruel king, Zahak. In one scene of the story, Kaveh goes to Zahak's court to ask him "not to kill his last son". The king makes him "sign an agreement telling everyone how righteous, kind and forgiving Zahak was". Kaveh tears the agreement to pieces, runs out of the court, and encourages people to start an uprising against the evil tyrant.

Another Persian character is *Arash*, the Iranian legendary archer who is remembered for the way he sacrificed his life for his country. The story starts with the attack of the Tooranian nomads on the Persians and their triumph. The enemies then negotiate a cunning condition of peace. "This condition was to determine the new boundary between their country and the Persia by firing an arrow … because they knew that the distance an arrow could be shot was not too great." Arash expresses his readiness to shoot the arrow. He goes up the Alborz Mountain and fires an arrow, putting his whole soul into this deed. Despite his death, the arrow reaches the former boarder, and Persia remains the same as before.

Across the three textbooks, similar texts could be found on celebrity lives in which real or invented figures become the focus of attention and their dedication to fame and financial success are narrated. An example of this could be seen in a text in pre-intermediate *Select Readings* entitled "How to Be a Successful Businessman". It tells the story of a poor Indian, Zubeir Kazi, who migrated from a small town in southeast of India to the United States in his youth in the hope of getting a job. To save money, he decides to find a job as a cook's assistant with KFC. His hard work impressed the owners of the restaurants to such an extent that they decided to appoint him as the manager of a newly opened restaurant. A few years later, Mr. Kazi could afford to buy a restaurant which was losing money and in a short time he changed it into a profitable restaurant. With the money he earned from selling the restaurant he bought

three other ones, which were again losing the money. Since that time, Mr. Kazi has continually been engaged in the act of buying restaurants and despite owning 168 ones, "He is not planning to stop there. He's looking for more poorly managed restaurants to buy" (p. 54).

In this story, Mr. Kazi is introduced as a "successful businessperson", because he has been able to earn more money and add to his wealth. This implies that the more money one owns, the more successful and the more valuable s/he is. Furthermore, a glance at the scenario shows that our leading character has earned his present economic status by pursuing a cyclical strategy of buying restaurants which are operating at a loss, changing them in some way and then selling them at a profit. This magic formula can change the face of Mr. Kazi from a "hardworking" man—as emphatically presented in the text—to an opportunist whose apparent concern is to make profit out of the loss of others. The other side of the coin is that what is presented here as Mr. Kazi's progress is in fact others' downfall; the economic growth he benefits from is dependent on the economic shrinkage of others. And this is where the concepts of capitalism and consumerism come to the fore. Discourses of this sort are representative of a neoliberal commercial world and labour market—characterised by "survival of the fittest" and hyper-competitive economic conditions (Gray, 2013). Given such ideologies, the text cannot be seen as merely biographical or informational but rather as promoting or advertising—produced for the sake of selling the products of a certain market and "branding" an individual.

To conclude, such worldviews are incompatible with the "balance" or "moderation" which has been recommended in Islamic teachings upon which individuals are advised to build their lives, making harmony between their natural physical needs and worldly lives and those of their souls. Accordingly, individuals are advised to reign in their consumerist habits and show concern for others, especially the poor. They are warned that ongoing dissatisfaction with their possessions and an obsession with worldly and superficial affairs, like financial gains or profits, could possibly make them turn a blind eye to the reality of their moral beings, the attainment of spiritual wealth, the care for humanity, and that which is truly important.

"The walls are symbols of …": Vision-lit language

As we proceeded with our story readings, discussing and sharing our personal interpretations of the stories' underlying themes, key episodes or characters became part and parcel of our classroom lives. On many occasions, such sharing of insights moved our talks well beyond mechanical conversations, aimless free discussions or written assignments, and our conversations became fertile soil for cultivating deeper vision and broader insight.

For example, one of the memorable stories we shared with students was the famous parable of "The Chinese and Greek Artists" by Rumi. It narrates the adventures of two groups of painters. To show their expertise in art, these artists agree to compete with each other in two rooms facing each other and separated by a curtain. While the Chinese painters were engaged in coloring the walls, the Greeks rubbed and brushed the walls. When the Chinese painters finally displayed their work, everybody marveled at the incredible beauty of their creations. When it was the Greeks' turn, they simply drew the intervening curtain with the result that all the colors of the other

room mirrored on their reflective walls in an endless variety of shapes and colours. This story with its symbolic concepts like "competition", "painting", "colour/coloration", "cleansing the walls", and "reflection" provided opportunities for us to delve below the surface to discover the parable's hidden mysteries. In one of our classroom discussions, Mahnaz, a Philosophy student whose fairly poor English fortunately did not discourage her from expressing her bright remarks, stated that to her "the walls are…symbols of the humans' soul"; and following her, Neda hesitantly said, "…the Chinese used the colours to show the appearance while the Greeks showed the soul". The concepts of "body", "soul", "colours", "paints", "polished walls" were among the words which went well beyond their denotative meanings, and students in various communities were seen to mold them into various shapes, like pieces of soft clay that meld themselves to the shape of various casts. For example, in her mid-term written reflection, Pegah, a vocal Industry Engineering student whose command of English enabled her to put complex ideas into words, had shown how the words "colours and paints" had broader and deeper meanings to her. Through drawing analogies between the "Chinese and Greek Artists" story and another one, "Disunion", she had pointed out that attractive but deceptive "actions and behaviors", like superficial, mask-like "colours and paints", are used "to defraud people", especially the individuals who "pay attention to appearance". Bringing the issue into a wider scope, she had concluded:

> I want to insist that our problem isn't just like…Chinese people with their beautiful words and paints. Our problem is the superficial and innocent people…who aren't like Greeks, underestimate themselves, pay attention to appearance and they are always lost. (Written reflection, Session 15)

By reading between and beyond the lines, students became engaged in looking through and thinking through the concepts, and seeing how they are impacted on them. Such practices broaden these concepts by constructing personal meanings from them as well as applying them—symbolically, figuratively or metaphorically—to other contexts. This is suggestive of the deeper levels of thinking or visioning (making visible the invisible) the students were engaged in. Such kinds of vision-involved or vision-lit language constructions are different from conventional academic reading practices, in which students are expected to look up the new words in the dictionary and memorise them fairly mechanically, get the main points of texts, paraphrase or summarise the texts, and provide stock responses to a set of reading comprehension questions—where their voices, views, words and wonders are mainly absent or stifled (Abdollahi, 2011).

Going through the written questionnaires completed by the students, we could see how such deeper thinking and putting these thoughts into words had made them come to new understandings of how English as a foreign language could be used for more than grammar and vocabulary activities. For example, Sepideh, a Computer Engineering student with good background in English learning, had mentioned that she "had never thought about learning language through thinking and commenting" since to her "language was always a memorising stuff". Similarly, Fahimeh had mentioned that the course had helped her to learn "to critique the texts and think more deeply". Narges, while mentioning that she prefers more "academic and current texts", had added that her "view of language [had] changed a little" as she had realised that "language is not limited to grammar and vocabulary".

"My story is like the story of…": Life-lit language

Within our discussions, we often tried to connect the classic stories to our lived-through experiences and our contemporary world. This often led to interesting comments on the part of the students. A memorable example of this happened as we were reading a prose version of "The Rabbit and the Lion", from Book I of *Mathnavi*, with students of Sociology. Briefly, this fable narrates the adventures of a small rabbit that succeeded at defeating a fierce lion. Through this mystical, symbolic story, Rumi attempts to remind the readers that we all have fierce lions inside ourselves that keep attacking us and the brave man is the one who can defeat not only "outward lions" but the "inward lions" too. Seeing as the concept of "outside lions" and "inside lions" had raised interesting interpretations and discoveries on the part of the students, the students were asked if they had ever acted like a rabbit conquering a so-called lion. A few seconds after this question, Sayeh, a calm and shy student, who often spoke softly and with long pauses, broke the classroom silence and said: "Yes … I remember … one person … told me … you … you can't … you can't do anything good. And I … very sad … but I tried … tried and I could do it … like the rabbit in the story". Her excitement and candor spread through the class as other students began talking about how they succeeded at "giving up" their "bad habits" as examples of inside lions. Farmehr, an English translator, whose rapid English speech often made it difficult for her classmates to understand her, also mentioned the time she was preparing for the University Entrance Exam and how the "vampire inside" wanted more "entertainments", "fun with friends", and not just "sticking in the room … just studying… not seeing movies", but she had conquered it.

In another event, after reading the story of "Disunion", one of the students, Leila, had reflected in writing about how she could relate the story to a similar event that had happened to her family. "Disunion" was an adapted story from Book I *Mathavi*, which narrates the story of a Greek king and his vizier who due to their long enmity with the Romans cleverly plotted to deceive their rivals and cause disunion among them. Relying on the concept of "deception" within the story, Leila had told her story as follows:

> Nine years ago we (my family and I) wanted to bought a house and we searched a lot after a few days we liked a house that it was very big and really pretty but its price is very low. But after we thought that, "Today we have very good luck" and we didn't think about it that why this house had very low price!! Finally we bought that house and after one month when we paid all of money for house (…) we understood that house selled to (2) family and finally we understood why that price of house is very low. My story is like the story of king and I think we like Romans that we didn't think before we do work. (Written Reflection, second semester, Session 15)

On yet another occasion after sharing the same story, "Disunion, with Computer Engineering students, Nastaran, who often showed great interests in political statements, surprised us by lecturing about "ways of disunion in these days". Coming to the front of the class, she talked about types of "enmity or animosity" in the modern world where "the developed countries find out that war isn't advisable, so they take an action for dividing between governments and nations" through "penetrating among them", "using the unconsciousness of ordinary people", and "dominating on the people's mind". She then explained:

> Enemies for their dominating on the societies with weapons such as mass media and making movies…with inaccurate and unpleasant aims…want to impress the thoughts and minds of juvenile in the society and…reach their destinations. In this way they get the society's movement, but people with their union can be obstacle for them. We also have a verse about this in Quran. If people don't change their fate, God won't change it. I wish a world with peace and without…injustice and…tyranny. (Oral presentation, second semester, Session 20)

Such personally generated linkages through which the students began to see themselves through the stories, or identify themselves with the characters, not only showed us how such classic, symbolic stories can have contemporary relevance or implications, but also how they can be pushed further than black and white, lifeless texts, and be resurrected and enlivened.

Such livening up of classic stories via contemporary stories gradually created a familiar atmosphere in which topics of local immediacy, concern, worth and significance took place of alien issues. A good example of this occurred as we read the story of "Arash, the Archer" with Computer Engineering students. During the session, a summary of the story was initially presented by three students. The presenters finished the story by showing some pictures of the Iraq-Iran war (1981-1989) martyrs, as those who "sacrificed their lives for our country...like Arash". The pictures on the board took our discussions in a different direction, as Raziyeh, one of the presenters, asked the class if we were ready to die for our country if a war happened. The students responded to her question in a variety of ways. Some quickly and abruptly announced their readiness, while others had different views. Fatemeh, for example, was emphatic that "when we want to do a revolution or something like that for our country…we should think a lot". She then referred to the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1357/1979 and the eight-year war which followed as "valuable activities" for which many people had "passed their soul", yet she stated that what dissatisfied her most was that new generations do not have the necessary "respect for this activity". She said: "Young people like me and teenagers that are in their twenties don't know about this revolution or they don't like it…or they ask why our parents did this." Partly agreeing with her, Raziyeh—while talking excitedly—stated that the main problem is that "people who think about their benefits come and they try to be…richer after war…or after revolution and misuse it and the young people don't like this…this misusing".

Events of this type, involving both supporting and opposing voices, created an opportunity for the students to talk around the immediate, familiar world they inhabit, the meanings and understandings they attribute to this world, the realities they live with and their collective and individual memories, experiences and concerns. Such events can be good examples of carrying "linguaculture" from one's mother tongue to a foreign language in which language learners "use their existing experience to take ownership and stamp their identities on English" (Holliday, 2014, p. 8).

Probably, through this "ownership", the language of our immediate community became closer to language events taking place in our foreign language classrooms. Interestingly, the issue of familiarity, or closeness, was among the factors mentioned by the students, which made the course more "pleasing" to them. Among others, Sayeh had mentioned that "such Persian texts are quite effective for learning English

language, firstly, because of their sweet and interesting subjects and their moral points and secondly, because of our relative familiarity with the topics." Zahra had also mentioned that, "Such texts are good because you may not feel distanced from the text you are reading."

MIGHT: Art-lit language

Throughout the second round of our action research, and with the aim of developing students' creativity, we chose to involve students in presenting the stories. To encourage the students to act artistically, it was suggested that they could make use of MIGHT—where M stands for Music, IG for Image and Graphic, H for Heart-full narration of the stories, and T for Time-wise interpretations and critiques of the stories. The students picked up on this artistic suggestion and we began to see creative, artistic crafting on the part of students in various communities.

One of these MIGHT-involved performances was delivered by three Computer Engineering students presenting an abridged prose version of "Kaveh, the Blacksmith" from Ferdowsi's *Book of Kings*. They presented the story using PowerPoint slides containing scenes of the story, relevant pictures illustrating events and characters, and selected Persian verses from the original poem. Their performance demonstrated harmonious cooperation among the presenters as well as an organised division of responsibilities. Sanaz, the story-teller, was in charge of narrating different episodes of the story in English. At the end of each scene, she left the stage and Hamideh took her place and passionately declaimed the Persian verses she knew by heart. Moones, known as a skillful musician, supplemented the work by playing pleasant live background music with her Setar. Depending on various scenes, the music was played at low or high volumes.

Their MIGHT-involved presentation and follow-up discussions in which we talked about various episodes of the story and their symbolic meanings changed the classroom moments into memorable ones. At the end of their presentation, they told us that they had spent plenty of time negotiating how they could make the story more alive and dramatic.

Other student-generated artistic performances and artworks involved dramatising the stories in front of the class, making hand-drawn images and illustrations out of stories, and weaving personally created stories or poems inspired by other stories or poems. The time, energy and hearts devoted to producing such artistic performances hint at what can possibly happen when the students are encouraged to actualise their potential and put their creativity into practice.

CONCLUSION

As non-native English language teachers and learners, we live in an atmosphere in which the authority, dominance and hegemony of Eurocentric products—including American or British literary works—have led to low estimation, disparagement and even abandonment of local knowledge. This has alienated individuals from their root ethnicity, language, and culture and subsequently has made them reconstruct their identities. Although an outright rejection of foreign literary works is not

recommended, there seems to be a need for non-native English speakers to occasionally veer away from conventional Eurocentric sources and share their literary heritage among themselves and with the rest of the world.

In this study, we sought to explore the possibilities of opening spaces for English translations of Persian classic works of literature in ELT classrooms and tracing the language events that unfolded as a result of this. The artistic, interpretative environments that were created provided spaces for the language learners to dig into their collective identity, current lives, roots, and local wisdom to re/create a "familiar" language—the language which comes from their everyday lives and rooted in their beliefs, values, collective literary and spiritual legacy. Such a sense of familiarity reiterates the advantages such national works of literature carry over other types of literature, including greater contiguity with the cultural background or heritage of the Iranian students and the existence of more familiar characters, themes, plots, values, and linguistic elements (Gray, 2005).

As Lazar (1993) also suggests, when students—particularly those coming from a rich literary heritage—are familiar with literature in their own language, "then studying some literature in English can provide an interesting and thought-provoking point of comparison" (p. 15). By the same token, Azizi (2014) suggests "if a portion of syllabus is allocated to literary texts and stories, it will make it more possible for Iranians who routinely refer to Persian literature in their daily talk in Farsi, to grasp the art of language in English" (p. 51). The emergence of language instances lightened by sparks of virtue, vision, life and art might be similar to what Canagarajah (1999) calls a "third way" in language decolonisation through which "periphery students will become insiders and use the language in their own terms according to their own aspirations, needs, and values … not as slaves, but as agents … creatively and critically" (p. 176).

The results of this endeavour can be critically revealing about Iranian language learners' cultural and linguistic norms and concerns. This can be better achieved if the Iranian knowledge base and its riches are capitalised on, critiqued, interpreted and appropriated for contemporary demands. Otherwise, we are more likely to be over taken by foreign identities sooner or later or become more crippled in our knowledge of first language and culture. Our search for the "tree of life at home" still needs further developing.

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