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A Socio-Historical Orientalist Approach to the European Translations of Ferdowsi's *The Epic of Kings*[1]

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Abstract

Orientalist translation analysis, particularly in the case of masterpieces of Eastern literature, remains underdeveloped in translation studies, and many investigations are required to address its various dimensions. A problem is that studies rarely draw on a relatively objective, model-oriented approach to Orientalism in translation. This study relies on a socio-historical model of Orientalist translation applied to a corpus of European renditions of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (*The Epic of Kings*). The model involves four elements: scholarly agency, continental translation, industrial/scientific superiority of orientalists, and the literary richness of eastern cultures. The data used in the analysis are collected from academic databases, encyclopedic resources, and conventional and electronic resources. The results suggest many of the translators are Western scholars. Moreover, many translations are based on another European translation as a mediator. In many cases, the translations advocate Western academic/investigative purposes, while relying on the advanced publication industry of their time. Finally, the appreciations/acknowledgments of the book reveal the reasons for choosing *Shahnameh* for translation. Besides confirming the functioning of the model, the study shows that translation is a derivative activity in many scholars' profiles. The study also raises questions about the very definition of "translation" because the translated works analyzed represent considerably different qualities.

Keywords: Socio-historical approach, Orientalism, Eastern literature, Literary translation, Ferdowsi, *The Epic of Kings*

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1. Introduction

Back in the 1990s, the works of such scholars as Lefevere (1992), Toury (2012), and Bassnett (2014) led to the formation of culturally inspired developments in translation studies (TS). Such scholars emphasized that translations, particularly literary ones, were cultural transmissions that represented the ideology, lifestyle, and innovations of a foreign culture. A similar line of studies highlighted social and historical variables, including anthropological, ethnographical and sociological approaches to translation. Orientalist translation probes into socio-cultural and socio-historical paradigms that critically investigate the "conditions" from which (literary) translations emerge. Orientalism was elaborately explicated by Egyptian literary and cultural theorist Edward Said (1979).

A very interesting question in TS is to figure out how Orientalist translation works. However, this area of research is underdeveloped and at the moment most existing papers/books only provide some thematic or expository discussions. To further organize the findings of historical accounts and present them in systematic and comparable formats, model-based approaches should be used to explore Orientalist translation. Kharmandar and Nemattollahi (2015) proposed a pseudo-causal, model-based approach that involves some elements that identify different dimensions of Orientalist translation. They primarily applied the model to European translations of Sa'di. However, just like Orientalist translation, the model should be employed in more literary cases so that its functioning can be evaluated.

The present study investigates a corpus of European translations of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (*The Epic of Kings*) in its wide-ranging representations using Kharmandar and Nemattollahi's (2015) socio-historical Orientalist translation model. The study relies on the principles of documentary and historical research, with a focus on sociological categories (e.g., agency,

knowledge distribution across cultures). The study tries to detect the pseudo-casual structure that combines the operation of a number of factors that together give rise to the formation of a continental network of European translations of *Shahnameh*.

2. The Theoretical Background

2.1. Sociology and Literary Translation

Investigating translation from a sociological perspective is gaining prominence in TS (Sapiro, 2014). A sociologically oriented approach would, among other things, focus on such variables as agency, translators' social status/prestige, means of information dissemination, and ethnographical considerations (Tymoczko, 2010; Tyulenev, 2014; Wolf, 2007). Lefevere's (1992) emphasis on the functions of agents in the transfer of literary translation suggests that literary translation is constrained by the functioning of literary agents and patronage.

In a sociological model of translation, there are distinctive components that are not normally addressed in other methods. One of the key issues in a sociological approach to translation is *agency* (primarily mentioned by Lefevere, 1992). Agency views translators as actual social agents who can actively introduce changes to society. Arising from this notion, there is the issue of social *status* or *prestige* of translators; are they called "translators" or other titles too? Do they come from ordinary people or elite layers of society? (Hui, 2011).

Ethnographical readings of translation, particularly those with a postcolonial underpinning, try to unfold how translation can be used as an instrument of power or colonializing other people(Hui, 2011). In this case, how translation works in line with colonial powers is substantially explored. Postcolonial readers see translation as a form of intelligence collection from the people living in a native or less advanced community. Another issue important

from a social perspective is technology and its impact on information dissemination. Cronin (2013), for instance, has focused on various dimensions of modern technology and translation. More specifically, information dissemination devices are as important as the textual translations. Kharmandar and Nematollahi (2015) explain how a literary translation becomes a major source of reference in a community depends on the technological/scientific status of the translator. This suggests that a technologically advanced society tends to more easily distribute its translations. Farahzad and Adili (2019) report a similar observation, explaining that the most flourishing period of translation publication in Iran began only in 1851, when the Dar al-Fonun (*The School of Sciences*) was established.

2.2. Orientalism

Orientalism could be regarded an ethnographic method of studying, categorizing, and ultimately representing the Oriental people. It is generally believed such representations might be epistemologically problematic because they are not gained under fully unbiased conditions (Donzé-Magnier, 2017). Another problem is what if the investigator misunderstands or willfully damages the identity of other ethnicities. Many authors have expressed such concerns in their criticisms of ethnical studies, and one of the most famous ones is called *Orientalism*. Orientalist approaches to translation offer socio-cultural and socio-historical paradigms that critically investigate the "conditions" from which (literary) translations emerge. *Orientalism* itself was elaborately explored by the Egyptian literary and cultural theorist Edward Said (1935–2003), who tries to define what the notion actually means: "Oriental is a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1979, p. 3).

This notion has been addressed in TS, too, and some even believe that there is a paradigm of Orientalist translation. Hui (2011), who provides a rich literature on postcolonial theories in translation, states that "Such scholarly translations reinforce the image of the "orient" as stagnant, mysterious, strange, and esoteric, of interest to and penetrable only with the help of a handful of orientalist "experts" (p. 201).

Kharmandar and Nematollahi framed an initial model to explore how Orientalist translation works. The model as they say is "detached from simple value judgments" and tries to objectively analyze the situation (Kharmandar & Nematollahi, 2015, p. 57). Moreover, along with critical issues, they emphasized that European representations of Persian literary works, even if epistemologically and ethically problematic, have given a particular reputation to such works. Through a qualitative content analysis of European translations of Sa'di, they concluded that four elements were at work in the translations: "scholarly agency", "continental translation", "industrial/scientific superiority of Orientalists" and "literary richness of eastern cultures." Because this study applies the model to Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, a brief history of the book's translation in Europe is reported in the next section.

2.3. European Translators of *Shahnameh*

Abu al-Qasim Ferdowsi (alternatively *Firdawsi*), was a tenth-century Persian poet, who is usually compared with Homer in the West. This massive book, *Shahnameh* (*The Epic of Kings*), has been translated into many world languages although the length of the book seems to be a factor that has discouraged translators from fully rendering the whole book. In many cases there are only excerpts of the book translated into other languages. It is believed that French and Russian translations are among the most important ones (Yektatalab & Karimnia, 2013). Yet, most interestingly some of these translations

were not even translations *per se* but ways of representing the ideology and lifestyle expressed in Ferdowsi's *The Epic of Kings*.

For instance, according to Mokhtar (1998), the first French translation of *The Epic of Kings* was rendered by Langlès in 1788, which addressed Ferdowsi (*Ferdoussy*) only as a sub-topic. It is also mostly a literary criticism work rather than a translation (Mokhtar, 1998). Similarly, Loloi (2017) has traced the history of English translations of *The Epic of Kings* by dividing them into two categories: those directly translated from Persian and those translated from other languages.

In the late eighteenth century, *The Epic of Kings* attracted the attention of Williams Jones (1746–1794), who tried to formulate a mythical framework based on *Rostam and Sohrab* sub-story (Loloi, 2017). Following that other English-speaking translators were Joseph Champion, James Atkinson, Stephen Weston, William Tulloh Robertson, Samuel Robinson (Loloi, 2017, pp. 94–96). In some of these attempts, a summarized version of the book was provided although again *Rostam and Sohrab* was the main attraction of the translations. Furthermore, such translations mostly relied on incomplete resources and could rarely re-produce the poetic magnificence of the original work.

3. Method

3.1. Corpus of the Study

The English translated works used in this study were four cases; they were selected because they are the most important translations of *The Epic of Kings* published in the English language and were referred to in numerous studies and publications. Most importantly, contrary to many other versions which are not available, these volumes are accessible and can be easily found (the following list is in chronological order):

Weston (1815)

Zimmern (1882)

Warner and Warner (1905)

Arnold (1916)

3.2. Design of the Study

This study is a critical, qualitative research guided by Kharmandar and Nemattollahi's (2015) socio-historical Orientalist model of literary translation. The main source text was Ferdowsi's Persian masterpiece, *The Epic of Kings*. This model contributed to a pseudo-causal concept of literary translation by focusing on extra-linguistic factors that shape the general situation. A pseudo-causal model according to Chesterman (2007, p. 9) deals with, "a whole complex of factors and contributory conditions, some of which are more powerful than others, and many of which also affect each other." The model involved four elements: scholarly agency, continental translation, industrial/scientific superiority of Orientalist, and literary richness of Eastern cultures. To conduct the study, first of all historical resources were used to address each factor.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The study focused on available historical corpora serving the purposes of the investigation. The information about the translators (e.g., their occupational profiles, fame, and expertise) was a part of the historical analysis. The translated works used in this study were selected from all of the European language varieties that were recorded, even partially, on the scientific databases searched in the study. The data were gathered through encyclopedic resources, library resources, works published on the Persian literary history, and hardcover or electronic resources contributing to the purposes of the study (including Encyclopedia Britannica, Daneshyari.com, EncyclopædiaIranica, Scopus, and Web of Science).

The data included "meta-textual" materials and were gathered by considering the categories defined in the model used; that is, the information

about the agents (e.g., the translators' occupational profiles, fame, and expertise), the qualities of the English translations (where available), publication years, possible cross-linguistic connections, and the technical tools used in the translation of *The Epic of Kings* into European languages.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis of the information collected about *The Epic of the Kings* translations was conducted based on the socio-historical framework proposed by Kharmandar and Nematollahi (2015). The model follows a pseudo-causal underpinning; according to Williams and Chesterman (2014), a cause-and-effect model/theory of translation (e.g., polysystem theory, cultural turn approaches, norms, target culture, patronage, ideology, relevance theory) would concentrate on a particular set of questions such as: "Why is this translation like it is? Why do people react like this to that translation? Why did this translator write that? Why did translators at that time in that culture translate like that? How do translations affect cultures?" (Williams & Chesterman, 2014, p. 55).

A formulaic statement of such an approach would be "If X and Y and Z → P." Kharmandar and Nematollahi's (2015, p. 56) Orientalist translation model follows such an assumption:

> Orientalist translation has been a historical sequence shaped by Western scholars within a magnitude of European languages armed by scientific propositions and advanced means of information dissemination with the purpose of discovering, disguising, and/or reputing historically and literarily rich Eastern cultures.

The model assumes when a set of "contributory factors" coincide, Orientalist translation can take place. All of these factors were taken into account in the present study, and the information observed was stored in tables for each language.

- **Scholarly agency:** the translators' profiles were studied specifically in terms of their social identity, as well as their political, academic, governmental, or scientific affiliations;
- **Continental translation**: this factor tried to determine the "source"text a translator used to render *Shahnameh*, by focusing on any cross-linguistic connections between the European languages involved. Meanwhile, the year of translation and the translated parts were also recorded;
- **Industrial/scientific superiority of Orientalists:** Through historical records, industrial and scientific developments in Europe associated with the information dissemination industry, and the related factors to the translation of *Shahnameh* investigated. Of course, most of the translations were contemporaneous or published using the same publication instruments;
- Literary richness of Eastern cultures: Through historical and literary records, the study investigated the translations, trying to detect the literary importance and cultural richness that the translators expressed in their accounts of (or usually introductions to) *Shahnameh*.

4. Findings and Results

4.1. A systematic Overview of the Translations

In this section, the four elements are applied to the corpus of European translations of *The Epic of Kings*. The model pursued a pseudo-causal logic, which assumed that the functioning of these four elements together would lead to some consequences in the receiving languages and even shape the whole process of translation. Generally speaking, the information of 57 translations of *The Epic of Kings* was found through searches on the databases. Of course, due to voids in historical information, the data about the translators and their renditions were incomplete in some items under analysis. Due to constraints of space, Table 1 provides a selective list of some of the European translations found, which systematically summarizes the elements that are important to the first two factors in the Orientalist model.

Table 1. A Summarized Collective List of the European Translations of The Epic of Kings

	Translator	Language	Status	Year of Translation	Parts translated	Connections (the source text)
1	Louis M. Langles	French	Orientalist	1778		
2	Victor Hugo	French	Poet, novelist, statesman	1829	Some poems of Firdausi (e.g., Zal)	
3	Jules Mohl	French	Literati and Orientalist	1831–1868	Complete French translation	
4	VasilyZhukovsky	Russian		1849	Some parts of the Shahnameh, story of Rostam and Sohrab	From the German translation of the book by Ruckert
5	A. Krymsky	Russian	The famous Russian Orientalist	1915	The tale of "Fereidoun and Zahhak"	
6	M. Diakonov	Russian	A famous specialist in the history of ancient Persia	1935	Made great translations from episodes of the "Shahnameh	He was the first Russian translator who rendered the "Shahnameh" directly from Persian
7	S. Atanasov	Bulgarian		1921	A nearly complete translation	Translation from the French rendition
8	Ivanburin	Bulgarian		1985	Story of "Kaveh, the Blacksmith	From the Russian translation
9	William Jones	English	Orientalist	1774	A few parts	
10	Stephen	English	Antiquarian,	1815	A profound linguistic and	

	Weston		clergyman and man of letters, multilingual translator, and linguist		literary analysis of *The Epic of Kings*	
11	Matthew Arnold	English	Poet, literary critic, literary translator, professor and cultural critic	1861	Story of Sohrab and Rustum	A liberal rendition imitating Homer
12	Helen Zimmern	English	Writer and translator	1882	A paraphrase of most parts	From Mohl's French translation
13	Johann August Vullers	German	Iranologist and orientalist	1838	Published a series of the "Shahnameh ", rendered into German to be used as textbooks at schools	
14	Friedrich Ruckert	German	Iranologist, professor of Oriental languages	1838	Influenced by "Rustam und Sohrab"	
15	Adolf Friedrich von Schack	German	Poet, literary historian	1851	The first person who translated the Shahnameh in whole	

Table 1 provides the information related to 15 translations out of the 57 ones found in the study. This systematic overview simplifies the element-by-element

analysis in the following section based on Kharmandar and Nemattollahi's (2015) model.

4.2. Model-Based Analysis of the Translations

4.2.1. Scholarly Agency

As the profiles of the translators demonstrated, the majority of the translators had strong academic, literary, and/or political affiliations, such as *Orientalist, poet, novelist, statesman, literati, historian, antiquarian professor,* and *Iranologist*. Of course, in some cases, such as Helen Zimmern and George and Edmond Warner, the profiles predominantly foregrounded "translator." In some other cases, the profile of translators was not perfectly stated. Yet, the involvement of major Western figures, such as William Jones, Matthew Arnold, and Victor Hugo, in the representation of Ferdowsi's work showed that "scholarly agency" was definitely a factor.

4.2.2. Continental Translation

The analysis here revealed that eight European languages were more dominant than others in translating Shahnameh, among which German, English and Russian were more frequent. Although some translators (e.g., Sokoloff, Diakonov, Atkinson, Weiss, von Schack) relied on the Persian original, others (e.g., Atanasov, Ivanburin, Joukovsky, Zimmern) indirectly drew on the works of other European translations. Yet, in many cases, such as Arnold, Krymsky, Arndet, Diakonov, Pole, Levy, Clinton, and Davis, only partial translations or even adaptations were published as translations of Shahnameh.

The idea of continental translation was proposed by Kharmandar and Nemattollahi (2015) to refer to the varieties of languages belonging to one continent in translating a masterpiece. A large corpus of translations could create an imperial image that could ultimately become the source for translating a given masterpiece. Through cross-linguistic readings, translators may rely on

already published translations in other languages to render their own versions. Many issues would be at stake here: first, TS has come to believe that translations are only representations and possible versions; that is why people still translate already translated works.

If a group of translators ignore the original text and merely follow a normally limited version of another translator in another language, their productions would be very likely to be conceptually and aesthetically limited. Toury proposes the idea of "directness" to refer to how a source text, whether the original or its translations, is used for translation: "In translating from what languages / text-types / periods (etc.) is it permitted / preferred / prohibited / tolerated? What are the permitted / prohibited / tolerated / preferred mediating languages and why are the given the status?" (Toury, 2012, p. 82).

4.2.3. Industrial/scientific superiority of Orientalists

One of the significant instruments that facilitated Orientalist translations was its academic anthropological foundations and the advanced publication industry. First, among the diverse fields of expertise that the translators exhibited, an area called "Iranology" was considerable; this suggests that the translated versions of *Shahnameh* were not simply acts of textual rendition but actual cultural investigations of Iran. For instance, Stephen Weston's translation even involved Latinated transcriptions of some Ferdowsi's verses, which would provide a rich resource for pure linguistic analysis, while Warner and Warner's rendition presents a full exploration of geography, culture and history of Persia.

Meanwhile, the tendency to use a phenomenon that can be called "selective translation" was dominantly observed in the translations. Although *Shahnameh* is an extensively large book, selective translations (mostly *Rostam and Sohrab*) would serve the academic goals of Western literary analysis and its cross-cultural mythological research (rather than promoting the original's

significance) (Davis, 2009). From the perspective of industrial development, too, one can historically compare the publication industry in Europe with that in Iran. As Farahzad and Adili (2019) state:

> [T]he Dar al-Fonun had a printing-house wherein foreign works were published. Amir Kabir hired expert teachers from France, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany. They taught a variety of subjects such as medicine and surgery, engineering, mineralogy, agriculture, pharmacology, [….] (Farahzad & Adili, 2019, pp. 12–13).

This time difference between early Orientalist studies (which began in the sixteenth century) and the delayed Occidental studies in Iran most clearly shows how technology could affect knowledge distribution. Even after Western works were translated into Persian, they were used as references for scientific and cultural modernization, which is again a very remote agenda from the working of Orientalism.

4.2.4. Literary Richness of Eastern Cultures

This element focuses on the appreciative discourse Orientalists expressed in relation to an Eastern literary masterpiece. In the case of *Shahnameh*, there were ideas that assigned particular (and sometimes unique) qualities to the work. As Lewis (2015, p. 315) clarifies: "Ferdowsi is called the Homer of Persia in *The Works of Sir William Jones*, who planned to write a poem on Rostam and Sohrāb, following the model of Greek Tragedy." Zimmern expresses in her introduction that, "[i]t has been my endeavour in this book to popularize the tales told by the Persian poet Firdusi in his immortal epic" (Zimmern, 1882, p. v). This very first evaluative idea (emphasized by "immortal epic") most explicitly reveals the translator's respect for the value and significance of the book.

Arnold's concertation on the book was only for its literary richness and its influence on English readers. As he explains, "*Sohrab and Rustum*is usually read at an age when students may be expected to study not merely the substance of a

poem but also its form, including- both structure and style, and its imaginative colouring" (Arnold, 1916, p. v). Warner and Warner (1905, p. viii)called the *Shahnameh* "Fidausi's greatest achievement", clarifying they were fascinated by the grandeur of the work. Similarly, Weston states, "[t]he Shah Nameh has been justly considered by the best judges as the most astonishing production of the east, and fairly deserves the panegyric given to an oration of Demosthenes by Lord Hardwicke [. . . .]" (Weston, 1815, p. 14).

4.3. Discussion

This study applied a socio-historical model of Orientalist translation to a corpus of European translations of Ferdowsi's *The Epic of Kings*. As far as the literature suggested, this was the first time the model was applied to another Persian poet after its application to the European translations of Sa'di. The "scholarly agency" profile found in this study was similar to that observed byKharmandar and Nemattollahi (2015, p. 54), who reported such identities as Indologist, Persianist, Arabist, professor and historian. Meanwhile, although there were renditions that relied on the original text, in many cases the translations were mediated by another European translation.

The industrial and scientific notions almost coincided with that of the translations observed by Kharmandar and Nemattollahi (2015) in the case of Sa'di. No doubt the publication industry within the same centuries experienced the same developments and advancements.As far as the literary richness of Eastern cultures is concerned, this element of the model, too, was very clearly expressed in the works of the translators under investigation. In the accounts available, the translators expressed various ideas in praising the work and the need for its more quality translations into European languages.

An overriding implication of the model is that "translation" is not a neutral term because, as the elements under analysis revealed, each translator

came from a different personal, scholarly, linguistic, and cultural background. Literary readers, TS and literature curriculum planners, and literary critics must be aware of the qualities of a translation before using it as a representative of a foreign (particularly Eastern) poet or writer.

The important contribution of the original framework lies in its model-oriented approach; in the literary history background, many works were reviewed that pursued literary, historical or social purposes. Yet, none of these studies ever proposed a model-based analysis and no such investigation was found in the background of the European tradition of *Shahnameh* translations. Therefore, Kharmandar and Nemattollahi's (2015) could help to elucidate the relationships better than most approaches due to its systematicity.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated a corpus of available European translations of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* based on an Orientalist translation model. The approach used in this study, instead of providing some expository texts about archival data, tried to find some systematic relations by exploring socio-historical information. Through its four factors, the model helped to categorize the content of historical records to divide them into four different streams shaping Orientalist translation. The model systematically showed European translations of *Shahnameh* were mainly produced by scholars, had created a continental network of cross-linguistic relations, rested on industrial/scientific ideas, and were remarkably interested in the original's literary significance. A general limitation affecting all historical analysis is the problem of missing or unavailable information, which could somewhat affect the accuracy of the cause-effect structure of the model. Furthermore, in many cases, the translators displayed expertise in areas other than translation. This implied that "translator" was not a dominant identity (a derivative one in most cases). The phenomenon of *selective*

translation also appeared to serve academic or investigative goals of Orientalists rather than highlighting the significance of the original.

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رویکردی اجتماعی-تاریخی از منظر شرق‌شناسی به ترجمه‌های اروپایی «شاهنامه» فردوسی[1]

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چکیده

تحلیل شرق‌شناسی ترجمه، به‌ویژه دربارهٔ شاهکارهای ادبی شرق، پیشرفت چندانی در حوزهٔ مطالعات ترجمه نداشته است و مستلزم تحقیقات بیشتر در ابعاد مختلف آن است. یکی از مشکلات موجود این است که مطالعات به‌ندرت از رویکردی نسبتاً عینی و مدل-محور در بررسی شرق‌شناسی و ترجمه استفاده می‌کنند. پژوهش حاضر براساس الگویی اجتماعی-تاریخی ترجمهٔ شرق‌شناسانه، بر مجموعه‌ای از ترجمه‌های اروپایی *شاهنامه* فردوسی اعمال شده است. مدل شامل چهار عنصر است: کارگزاران نخبه، ترجمهٔ قاره‌ای، برتری صنعتی/علمی شرق‌شناسان و فرهیختگی ادبی فرهنگ‌های شرق. داده‌های استفاده-شده در این تجزیه‌وتحلیل از پایگاه‌های اطلاعاتی، دانشنامه‌ها و منابع متعارف و الکترونیک جمع‌آوری شده است. نتایج مطالعات نشان می‌دهد بیشتر مترجمان، نخبگان غرب هستند. به‌علاوه، بسیاری از ترجمه‌ها، بر اساس ترجمه اروپایی دیگری انجام شده‌اند. در بسیاری موارد، ترجمه‌ها اهداف علمی/تحقیقاتی غرب را دنبال می‌کنند، درحالی‌که به صنعت پیشرفته چاپ دوران خودشان اتکا دارند. در نهایت، استقبال و تمجید از کتاب نشان‌دهنده دلایل انتخاب آن برای ترجمه است. این پژوهش، علاوه بر تأیید عملکرد مدل، نشان می‌دهد ترجمه فعالیتی فرعی در پیشینه بسیاری از نخبگان بوده است. پژوهش همچنین ابهاماتی را در مورد تعریف اصطلاح «ترجمه» مطرح می‌کند زیرا آثار ترجمه‌شده در این مطالعه کیفیت‌های بسیار متفاوتی از یکدیگر نشان می‌دهند.

واژه‌های راهنما: شرق‌شناسی، مطالعات ترجمه، ترجمهٔ ادبی، *شاهنامه*، ادبیات شرق، تحلیل اجتماعی-تاریخی

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