

Commentary

# Challenges toward Sustainability? Experiences and Approaches to Literary Tourism from Iran

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**Abstract:** Interdisciplinary narrative studies are of great importance in several disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Cultural tourism and its sub-disciplines, including the complex issue of ‘literary tourism’, is an interdisciplinary field of investigation, positioned in between geography and urban–rural studies. In Iran, this form of tourism has been neglected so far—with no distinction between urban and rural areas—despite a particularly rich literary heritage. The present study recognizes the challenge of literary tourism in Iran, delineating some possible actions to develop it as a future engine of economic growth, especially in rural districts. As a contribution to a refined comprehension of literary tourism development paths, a content analysis was run collecting views and textual data on literary tourism in Iran. The empirical results of this study indicate that the mentioned challenges can be classified into several main dimensions and a broader set of sub-themes. The possible actions responding to such challenges can be classified into more dimensions and a vast number of sub-themes. Actions reducing territorial disparities and fueling entrepreneurship in local communities are appropriate to stimulate the emergence (and, possibly, consolidation) of literary tourism districts in Iran, giving an original contribution to sustainable development especially—but not exclusively—in rural settlements.

**Keywords:** cultural tourism; literary heritage; human geography; content analysis; middle east



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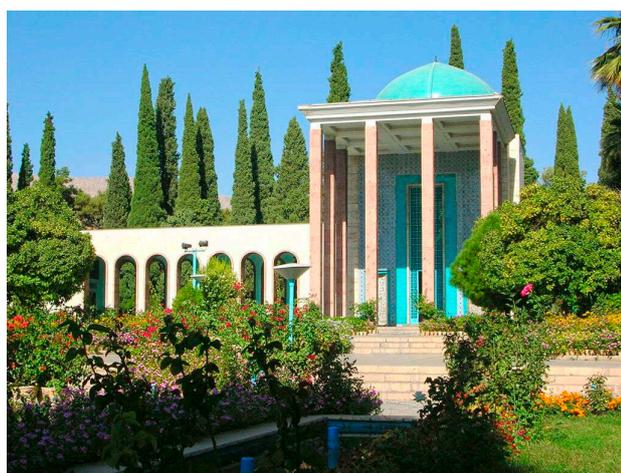
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## 1. Introduction

Scholars, practitioners, and international organizations acting in the field of sustainability and sustainable development have assumed cultural tourism (and, for generalization, cultural heritage assets) as a key factor of economic growth [1–3]. In the face of social and cultural effects of globalization, it is important to respect and protect symbols and values by which nations understand their history and local traditions [4]. Experts have enumerated various obstacles in the way of tourism development, arising from infrastructure, economic, cultural, human, political, governmental, and managerial aspects [5–7]. In the Middle East—a region with a particularly rich cultural heritage and the need of stronger and more effective policies toward sustainable development—‘cultural tourism’ and its sub-sectors, including ‘literary tourism’, intended as a form of tourism compatible with the socioeconomic and territorial conditions of the region, face limited administrative and organizational obstacles, in turn displaying comparative advantages compared with other tourism types and activities [8]. In Iran—a representative country in the Middle East—literary tourism is frequently taken as a desirable option to break the current stalemate and a way to boost the endogenous development of the tourism industry [9]. Empirical findings of earlier studies demonstrate that Iranian culture has a high ability to

reproduce and fertilize, being more influential than being influenced on a global scale [10]. However, despite having great potential for various attractions and literary heritage, Iran seems to be unable to hold a significant reputation in this field. Although tourist flows traveling to 'literary cities' in Iran (including Shiraz, Mashhad, and Tabriz as significant examples of 'literary cities' in the whole Middle East region) have been intensified in recent decades, dedicated planning for sustainable development via promotion of literary tourism is still lacking in the country [10]. Scattered efforts to promote literary tourism, arousing people's interest and occasionally attracting the attention of governments, have been taken over the past years in the private sector, having some enthusiastic stakeholders of literary heritage as the main engine [7]. Their efforts also exemplify a broader debate on tourism development in Iran as a branch of cultural tourism [9].

The geographical area of the Iranian civilization is the birthplace of famous poets and writers, such as Ferdowsi, Khayyam, Rumi, Saadi Shirazi, Hafez, and Nizami Ganjavi [11]. In recent years, the cities of Tabriz and Shiraz in Iran have tried to join the network of 'creative literary cities' and have submitted their proposals to UNESCO [12,13]. Undoubtedly, the attractions of Iran's literary heritage have a prominent place in the field of Eastern civilization, the use of which can be globally attractive (Figure 1). Literary tourism can be also seen as a tool of 'soft power' and 'cultural diplomacy', deepening the achievements and values of the country's cultural heritage [14].



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 1. Cont.



(e)



(f)

**Figure 1.** Examples of literary sites in Iran. (a) Tomb of Saadi Shirazi (poet and writer of the 13th century AD); Source: Shiraz Municipality (<https://shiraz.ir>) (accessed on 23 July 2022). (b) Tomb of Hafez-e Shirazi (poet and lyricist of the 14th century AD); Source: Fars’s Administration of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism (<https://fars.mcth.ir>) (accessed on 23 July 2022). (c) Museum and tomb of Shahriar and other writers and poets of Tabriz; Source: alibaba (<https://www.alibaba.ir/mag/maqbaratoshoara/>) (accessed on 23 July 2022). (d) Omar Khayyam Neyshaburi Mausoleum Garden (philosopher, poet and mathematician, 1048–1131); Source: <https://www.karnaval.ir/things-to-do/mausoleum-of-omar-khayyam-nishapur#lg=1&slide=24> (accessed on 23 July 2022). (e) Tomb of Atar Neyshaburi, Neyshabur (poet and writer, 1146–1221) Source: <http://visitkhorasanrazavi.ir/ItemDetail.aspx?get=u0Tqt4kB/fgfsZASTHgeTg==> (accessed on 23 July 2022). (f) Tomb of Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsi Tusi, Mashhad (poet and epic writer, 935–1020). Source: <http://visitkhorasanrazavi.ir/ItemDetail.aspx?get=n2zYLrIGpufUD0UmmfSr6Q==> (accessed on 23 July 2022).

Despite a rich cultural heritage, as delineated above, the current situation in Iran calls for specific plans promoting literary tourism. To support strategic policies with the necessary background information, the present study identifies the possible challenges in the way of tourism development in Iran through a content analysis and narrative approach collecting and interpreting published data and information on literary tourism. Based on this literature review, the content analysis aimed at identifying appropriate policy responses overcoming such challenges [15]. The empirical results of our study are expected to form a broader understanding of literary tourism in Iran, providing a suitable platform for cultural tourism research and planning [4], intended as an interdisciplinary topic of sustainable development in Middle Eastern countries.

## 2. Literature

### 2.1. Cultural Tourism

Cultural tourism is one of the oldest forms of tourism. As a general rule, it is impossible to provide a unique definition of ‘cultural tourism’ [16]. Scholars have provided different definitions in this field based on their intellectual background and research experience [17]. Different cultural and disciplinary orientations about the two notions of ‘tourism’ and ‘culture’ prevent the development of a unique definition of cultural tourism [18]. Despite such semantic constraints [19], consensus exists around the fact that this form of tourism depends on the attraction of (material and immaterial, tangible and intangible) cultural resources in specific destinations [20], such as architecture, literature, works of art, music, specific lifestyles, types of festivals, customs and specific local cultures, films and cinemas, art exhibitions, and cultural museums [21].

Urry [22] distinguished a ‘romantic gaze’ and a ‘collective gaze’ when discussing cultural tourism. The ‘romantic’ gaze is more specific to tourists who have a higher level of culture and education. Literary tourism fits into the framework of ‘romantic’ gaze, so it should be accepted that cultural tourists are more interested in culture-related activities

and they are usually trying to tangibly meet their cultural needs to improve their level of knowledge and culture [23]. The United Nations World Tourism Organization provided a widely used definition of the concept of cultural tourism [24], stating that “people’s travel to cultural attractions outside their residence, to learn, experience, and meet their cultural needs, such as: participating in cultural and artistic events, visits to cultural heritage sites, visits to cultural and artistic exhibitions, watching movies and theaters” [25].

## 2.2. Literary Geography

Literary geography is a result of the continuous interplay between geography and literature, and its emergence is closely related to recognizing the importance of the notions of ‘space’ and ‘place’ in the humanities, especially in the field of literary criticism [26]. This interdisciplinary issue has been widely investigated since the 1990s along with the expansion of ‘literary cartography’ [27]. Tally [28] provided comprehensive knowledge in this field, focusing on the history and philosophy of the concepts of ‘spatiality’ in literature; concepts such as the ‘sense of place’ and the linkage between narrative and ‘social space’ are also explained [29]. Literary geography and its consisting elements such as the ‘spirit of a place’ have been finally discussed in the view of a ‘geo-critical’ approach to tourism development [30].

Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) was a well-known writer working extensively on the issue of ‘literary geography’. In this regard, she examined the intrinsic linkage between the places of residence of two English writers, William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens, by reviewing their books, as a contribution to literary geography. Woolf concluded that readers use literary texts as guide books and in this way they travel in the natural geography of England, to closely visit the real places that are renowned for their connection with the works of these famous writers. Woolf contributed to a sort of literary journey, assuming that ‘the spirit of a place’ is manifested in two forms, ‘scientific’ and ‘imaginary’. In the imaginary and emotional form, any traveler is looking for things that fire the imagination, such as imagining Dickens in a special location that is connected and consistent with the narrative of his life; in the scientific form the reflection and impact of the writer’s environment on his works is sought [21]. Based on this approach, it can be said that in the framework of literary geography, and its relationship with literary tourism, one seeks to understand to what extent the environment around the author has influenced the creation of their works [31]. In other words, the author’s inspirational elements in the creation of literary works are searched for within the environmental representations and features of the geographical space of the author’s life [32].

In Iran, literary geography does not have a long tradition in the national scientific, technical and cultural debate as in other countries, likely depending on the mere spatiality of the Persian prose and poetry. Unlike contemporary European writers, Iranian writers do not pay much attention to cities and rural places around them, likely because they are wandering in their mental space and imaginary geography and distancing themselves from real spaces [2]. Another reason is that the mechanism of spatial elements in classical prose and poetry and contemporary Iranian and European literature is rather different. Representation of geographical spaces (urban and non-urban) in the works of European literature is not proposed to readers to only represent reality in realistic stories [33]. Rather, it is a way to represent the intellectual space together with the geographical space [27].

## 2.3. Literary Tourism

Urry [22] argued that today’s values, such as the aesthetic and spectacular aspects of many places, as well as the importance of the nostalgic attraction of ‘societal heritage’ (cultural heritage and natural heritage together), can be re-configured in the context of postmodern concepts and meanings. Literary texts and writers and their legacy have always been one of the motivating factors for tourism trips. In the contemporary world, this form of tourism has grown exponentially due to the widespread publication of literary

texts and the general public familiarity with literature and biographies of writers through media such as movies and television [34].

Yiannakis and Davies [35] assumed that literary tourism—as one of the well-known forms of tourism sector—developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries along with the consolidation of literary realism. According to Andersen and Robinson [17], the history of literary tourism dates back to centuries ago and at least to the time of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, Watson [36] traces the beginning of modern literary tourism to the eighteenth century, when people traveled to see the houses and tombs of famous writers, as well as the perspectives and places that writers presented in their works from different geographical areas. Herbert [24] stated that literary tourists were usually well-educated and with a high social status far back in the past and argued that “the roots of literary tourism go back to the travels of scientists who passed long distances intending to visit places related to the life and works of famous writers—in the fields such as literary prose, plays, and poetry. From this point of view, literary tourists can be considered as highly educated and well-cultured tourists who have a high level of cultural capital, respect literary heritage, and their pattern of consumption is different from other social classes” (pp. 313–312). What has led to the significant development of literary tourism over the past two decades is the growth in the importance of postmodern concepts and values [26]. Based on a postmodern approach, retaining the ‘originality’ of literary places is of great importance in the management of literary tourist destinations [5]. On the concept of literary tourism, there are various and relatively different definitions and some of them have been proposed as follows:

“Literary tourism is a subset of cultural tourism and heritage tourism that includes places associated with literature writers, literary books and stories, literary festivals, creative arts, movies, and media productions” [31].

“Literary tourism is an opportunity to travel to the birthplaces, graves, houses, properties, and sites hosting memorabilia and relics of literary figures; such trips provide rich cultural experiences, chances to participate in literary festivals and events, and also opportunities to visualize the space where the creative thinking was formed or the place where famous literary works were created” [37].

Additionally, Topler [38] identified literary tourism as one of the best practices that can help in implementing a sustainable tourism strategy. Smith et al. [39], based on their knowledge of literary tourism studies, have classified the places of literary tourism into three groups: (i) “real places”, existing in the real world and fully accessible, such as the places of birth, life, creation of literary works, death, and the tombs of writers, (ii) “imaginary” (perceptual) places, representing space, environment, and content of stories, narratives, poems, and movies, as well as (iii) “socially constructed places” which are created to develop literary tourism, such as the destinations holding literary and cultural festivals, exhibitions and literary museums.

For Slovenia, Topler [38] documented how, despite the differences in literary heritage compared to Iran, economic barriers combined with inadequate promotion have hindered the development of this type of cultural tourism, exactly as in the Middle East. Hoppen et al. [31] proposed a collaborative approach to future literary tourism development with a consistent stakeholder collaboration with the desired target markets, consistent with existing brands and sustainable in the long term. In addition, Müller [40] found that literary places have to cater to a variety of other tourist needs and, besides literary attractions, other factors including infrastructure, accommodation, and a scenic setting have to be supplied for managing literary places successfully.

### 3. Methodology

This work is intended as a ‘commentary’, i.e., a position paper delineating the subjective perspective of authors in a relatively less investigated field—literary tourism in the Middle East—based on the authors’ own research experience and a narrative approach [41] grounded in a broad literature review of literary documents in the Persian language. More

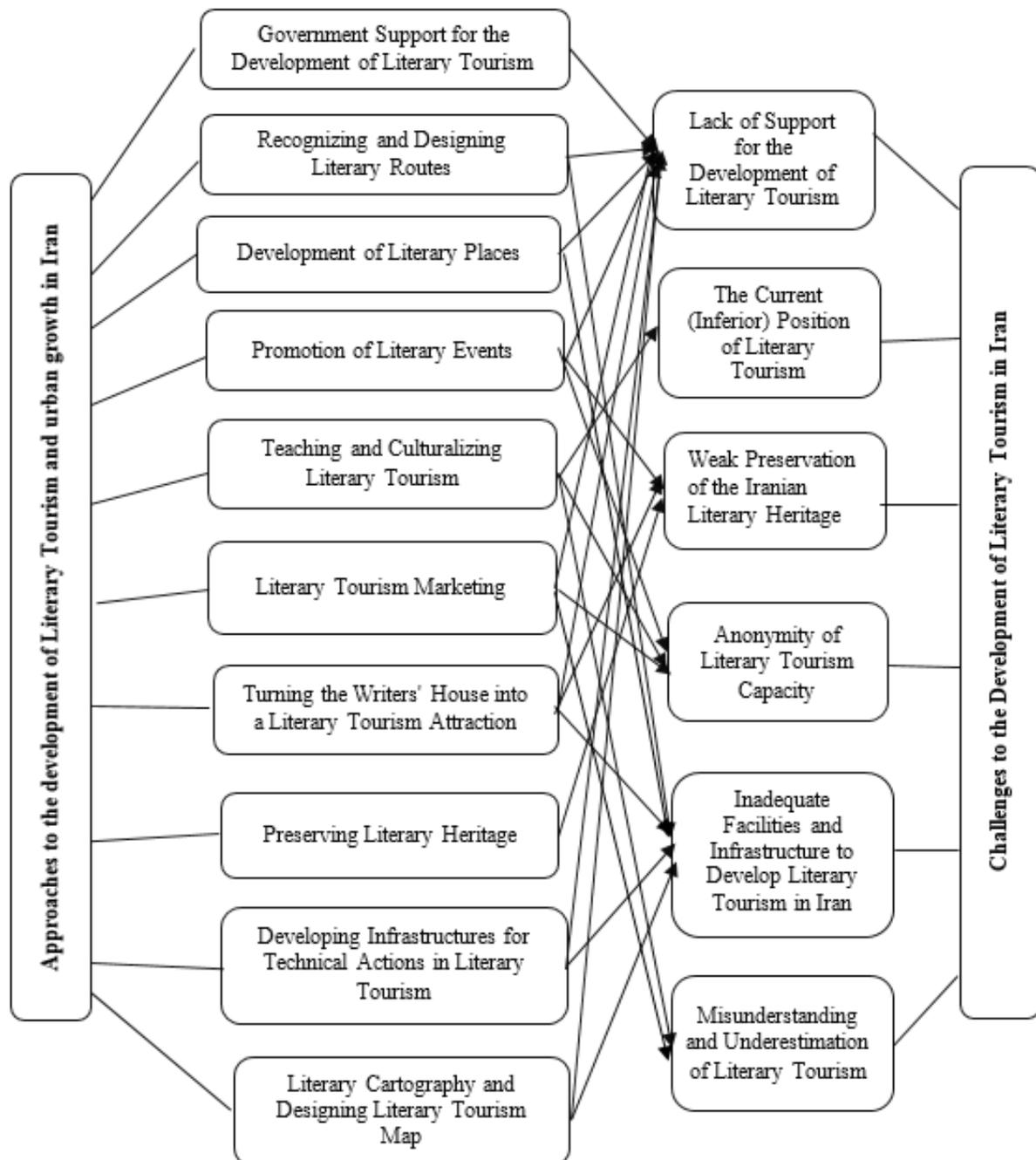
specifically, the results of this literature review were organized, summarized and interpreted using a basic framework that refers to the thematic ‘content analysis’, a qualitative method largely adopted in humanities and social sciences [42]. This method identifies, analyzes, and extracts existing dimensions and arguments [43–45] in a wider dataset containing qualitative, quantitative or mixed information [46–48]. Although various ways to use thematic analysis exist, the operational approach based on simplified steps proposed in Braun and Clarke [18] was adopted here. These steps include (i) data collection, (ii) a preliminary understanding of the content and intrinsic meaning of collected data, and (iii) identification of the basic analysis’ themes [49–51].

The authors collected, within a specific database, any text (e.g., articles, speeches, interviews published on various media, scientific and news reports, personal notes, and writings) that (directly or indirectly) deal with the subject of literary tourism in Iran. All these textual data have been published over the last decade online and in the Persian language. We restricted the review to the last ten years and with documents in Persian only with the aim of working with more homogeneous sources as far as economic, social, demographic, institutional, political, cultural, and religious attitudes, beliefs and perceptions are concerned [52–54]. The fact that most of the research team are Persian native-speaking allowed a complete analysis of the intimate and latent meaning of any written source, avoiding any possible misunderstanding due to linguistic mediation, i.e., translation [55]. The selected time horizon was finally represented with a relatively broad production of literature, allowing a comprehensive review of earlier evidence as far as literary tourism in Iran is concerned. This was an arbitrary decision based on a precautionary criterion of homogeneity [8]. However, we believe that working with data sources as homogeneous as possible may contain the intrinsic weaknesses typical of a research design based uniquely on a literature review and the authors’ (informed) knowledge of the phenomenon at stake [56]. The framework is flexible enough to be adapted to the individual needs of other studies, e.g., enriching the literature review by covering a wider time period [57]. A complete framework describing the multi-step approach adopted here is illustrated in Figure 2.

Texts were classified under main categories or codes in a subjective manner, following the authors’ expert knowledge. The main themes were summarized after having associated together primary themes with the same meaning [58]; repetitive ones were eliminated at this stage; consequently, they were classified under the main themes by nature. The themes were specific, distinctive, and non-repetitive and, at the same time, general enough to include the whole ideas presented in the main body of the text [32]. This reduces the data to a set of important, acceptable, and controllable themes that represent a summary of the original text. In a subsequent step, the themes under the main categories were reviewed, ensuring that the concept and meaning of themes of each category are highly related to each other [39]. Each category assures the highest internal homogeneity and the largest heterogeneity within the remaining categories. Another operational step began when the operator reached a satisfactory network of themes that can be defined further and modified for analysis. In this perspective, thematic networks should be considered as a tool for analysis, not the results of the analysis itself [59]. These networks, however, help to gain a deeper understanding of the textual meaning, to describe the themes’ content and to identify their patterns [60]. After creating theme networks, the researcher should refer to the original text again and interpret it with the help of these networks [32]. In the last operational step, a report of research findings was drawn according to the analysis of the themes’ network, in turn presenting textual pieces of evidence [61].

Based on the operational framework illustrated above, a total of 194 pages were collected including pieces of scientific articles, lectures, interviews, short news articles, and reports dealing with (and representative of, to the best of our knowledge) literature tourism in Iran. This content provided about 57,700 words related to the development of literary tourism in Iran subject to analysis. Then, based on the objective of our study, i.e., identifying the concepts and themes extracted from the coding process, these textual

contents were classified into two main subjects, ‘challenges’ and ‘approaches’ to the development of literary tourism in Iran. The classification process was subjective and based on the informed knowledge of the authors [62] concerning the literary tourism issue in the Middle East. Despite being narrative and qualitative, and giving wide degrees of freedom to operators with the interpretation step [63], we believe that this approach was satisfactory in a ‘commentary’ context—where the main scope of the work was to resemble a specific research issue (literary tourism) in a socioeconomic context (Iran and, for generalization, the Middle East) that is relatively under-investigated.



**Figure 2.** A graphical abstract summarizing the complexity of the two dimensions (‘Challenges’ and ‘Approaches’) characteristic of literary tourism in Iran according to the main literature review performed in this study.

In this framework, 88 basic themes in Persian (listed in Supplementary Materials Table S1, with the relative translation into English in Supplementary Materials Table S3) about problematic issues and obstacles to the development of literary tourism (i.e., ‘challenges’) were identified for Iran. In addition, 165 initial themes in Persian (listed in Supplementary Materials Table S2, Supplementary Materials, with the relative translation into English in Supplementary Materials Table S4) about strategies for the development and promotion of literary tourism (‘approaches’) in Iran were also identified. Concerning ‘challenges’, after merging similar themes and removing repetitive issues from the list of 88 elements, a total of 43 sub-themes were identified. Using an inductive-to-deductive approach [64] in the framework of the qualitative content analysis [65], these sub-themes were categorized under six main themes:

1. Lack of Support for the Development of Literary Tourism;
2. The Current (Inferior) Position of Literary Tourism;
3. Weak Preservation of the Iranian Literary Heritage;
4. Anonymity of Literary Tourism Capacities;
5. Inadequate Facilities and Infrastructure to Develop Literary Tourism;
6. Misunderstanding and Underestimation of Literary Tourism.

Concerning ‘approaches’, after merging similar themes and removing repetitive issues from the list of 165 elements, 68 sub-themes were identified. As above, these sub-themes were classified into 10 main themes:

1. Government Support for the Development of Literary Tourism;
2. Recognizing and Designing Literary Routes;
3. Development of Literary Places;
4. Promotion of Literary Events;
5. Teaching and Culturalizing Literary Tourism;
6. Literary Tourism Marketing;
7. Turning the Writers’ House into a Literary Tourism Attraction;
8. Preserving Literary Heritage;
9. Developing Infrastructures for Technical Actions in Literary Tourism;
10. Literary Cartography and Designing Literary Tourism Map.

The six ‘challenge’ issues and the ten ‘approach’ issues are extensively discussed in the following results chapter. Although subjective and context-driven, the framework adopted in this study and the related data collection provided a coherent methodological framework and qualitative analysis of a complex and articulated issue such as literary tourism in Iran. This analytical framework can be applied to other socioeconomic contexts when more specific, quantitative sources of information are lacking.

#### 4. Results

Empirical findings on challenges and approaches to the development of literary tourism in Iran are described separately in the following paragraphs together with the qualitative step of thematic analysis adopted for each issue.

##### 4.1. Developing Literary Tourism in Iran: New and Old Challenges

Research findings based on the theme analysis of related textual data and theme’s network were categorized into 43 sub-themes grouped into six main dimensions. Subsequently, the challenges in question were separately analyzed in the framework of the main and secondary network themes.

###### 4.1.1. Lack of Support for the Development of Literary Tourism

According to the research findings, 11 statements were placed as sub-themes under the main theme of the ‘lack of support for the development of literary tourism’ in Iran, including disbelief of cultural institutions in the potential of literary tourism, inefficiency of the responsible institutions in protecting the cultural and literature heritage of the country,

limited use of the capacity of national myths and legends in the development of cultural tourism, government's lack of attention to the importance of the country's literary heritage for the development of the tourism sector, lack of attention to the heritage of literary figures, inability to introduce the potential of Iranian literature and literary heritage to the tourism market, restricted ability of Iranian literary heritage to act as a source of inspiration for world literature, rhetorical performance of officials in dealing with cultural and literary tourism, disregarding the need to change the tourism model from a purely historical to literary and cultural approaches, destruction of the material heritage of many literary figures, lack of attention of responsible organizations and institutions to the capacities of local literary heritage and local folklore. In this regard, a national expert in tourism studies [66] said that:

“literary tourism in Iran as the cradle of literature has been neglected so far. This failure can have various reasons, but the most important one is the negligence of the officials in using the literary capacities of the country ( . . . ). A specific strategy for using these capacities has not been defined ( . . . ). Due to the negligence of the officials, who knows where Jalal Al-Ahmad's house or ( . . . ) is and whether it is possible to visit them at all or not”.

#### 4.1.2. The Current (Inferior) Position of Literary Tourism

Discussions on the main theme of the current inferior position of literary tourism in Iran mostly focused on (and criticized) the current situation of Iran in the literary tourism global market, considering five sub-themes: the backwardness of Iranian literary cities compared to other literary cities of the world, lack of a dominant position in global tourism, failure to use the Iranian cultural and literary assets for the development of literary tourism, lack of attention to literary heritage and the obliterating literary identity of Iranian literary cities, anonymity of Iranian literary tourism attractions. In the following lines, we reported examples from two national studies about Iranian tourism:

“( . . . ) Iran can revolutionize the tourism industry with its literary richness and poets such as Saadi, Hafez, Ferdowsi, Khayyam, Attar, and Baba Tahir; but unfortunately, this type of tourism still has no place in Iran and for this reason, Iran is deprived of its income and some of the capacities of this industry are being destroyed” [67]. “Iran despite having plenty of potentials has not been able to properly present itself as a literary tourism hub by introducing Iranian poets and literary figures and benefit from its positive effects” [68].

#### 4.1.3. Weak Preservation of the Iranian Literary Heritage

The main theme of the weak preservation of the Iranian literary heritage includes five sub-themes: inability to retain the originality of many literary sites, weakness in preventing the confiscation of Iranian literary heritage, destructing and changing use of the literary figures' houses, inheritance law and the legal ownership of contemporary literary figures' houses, lack of appropriate strategies for preserving literary heritage. To this regard, it was stated that “the change of use of the historical houses of the country, including the houses of the greats of literature and art, is not the story of today and yesterday, and we hear new media reports now and then . . . a house that is the cradle of literature and art of a country . . . is in danger of destruction. But some countries have kept the houses of their artists from hundreds of years ago” [69].

#### 4.1.4. Anonymity of Literary Tourism Capacities

The topics discussed under the main theme of anonymity of literary tourism capacities include five sub-themes: lack of a specific program for the development of literary tourism in executive organizations and institutions, neglecting the capabilities of cyberspace in the development of literary tourism, lack of literary routes and paths related to the attractiveness and pervasiveness of literature in Iran, lack of accurate knowledge of the different

assets of literary tourism, lack of sufficient knowledge of literary tourism itself among the Iranian people. A tourism expert said that:

“due to its mystical literature and ancient culture, Iran is one of the destinations in the world with great potential for the development of literary tourism which has received less attention so far ( . . . ). This requires more effective and efficient planning to benefit from this cultural and spiritual heritage. One of the first steps is designing the special path of literary tourism” [70].

#### 4.1.5. Inadequate Facilities and Infrastructure to Develop Literary Tourism

Discussions on the main theme of the inadequate facilities and infrastructure to development of literary tourism included 10 sub-themes: lack of facilities for catering to literary tourists, lack of literary museums in Iran, lack of fictional literary places, lack of professionalism of many tour guides in Iran, lack of investment in the field of literary tourism, lack of attractiveness of some Iranian literary places, weaknesses of the spatial and temporal dimension of Iranian literature, lack of proper understanding of the importance of literary heritage in the development of literary tourism, inability to introduce the figures of Persian literature to the world, lack of cinema and television productions as an encouragement for literary tourism. Two literary geographers state that

“so far, no comprehensive plan has been developed to direct and organize this type of tourism ( . . . ). The anonymity of space-based works is one of the important problems facing the literary tourism of Iran” [27].

#### 4.1.6. Misunderstanding and Underestimation of Literary Tourism

These findings emphasize the incomplete (or incorrect) understanding of the nature of literary tourism by ordinary people or by executive and cultural institutions. According to the findings, seven known sub-themes were considered here: lack of creativity in creating literary attractions, the anonymity of various aspects of literary tourism, having a modest opinion of some literary figures within cultural authorities, a limited knowledge of the material heritage of great contemporary poets and writers, limiting the literary tourism to visiting, e.g., the tomb of literary figures, misunderstanding the concept of literary tourism by managerial and executive officials of the country, limiting literary geography to some important cities such as Shiraz. In this regard, we can refer to the speeches of two contemporary writers in Iran:

“Literary tourism in its modern notion and concept is not defined in our country and does not have a long history either ( . . . ) that we expect it to gain attention in our country like other countries” [71].

“Our literary tourism is limited to visiting the silent graves. If they (people) go to Konya to see Rumi’s tomb, they get acquainted with a collection; there is Mevlevi Sema Ceremony and music, but here everything is limited to one tombstone” [72].

### 4.2. *Approaches to the Development of Literary Tourism and Urban Growth in Iran*

The empirical findings in these arguments were divided into 68 sub-themes grouped in 10 main dimensions. Following the methodological approach, they were separately described with related pieces of evidence for each of them.

#### 4.2.1. Government Support for the Development of Literary Tourism

Regarding the main theme of government support for literary tourism, nine sub-themes were identified and analyzed: (i) exercising cultural diplomacy on the development of literary tourism, (ii) creating a legal framework for the activities of people and non-governmental organizations, (iii) government financial support for promotion of various literary events, (iv) reconstruction and revival of literary heritage attractions, (v) helping to create satisfying experiences of literary travel, (vi) institutionalizing and establishing organizations, (vii) investment facilities, (viii) utilizing the great potentials of Iranian

literature for the development of literary tourism, and (ix) fulfilling its potential capacities. The importance of this issue is such that out of the six targets of the National Conference on Literary Tourism (2012) in Iran, two goals were focused on the role of government:

“bringing together the three vertices of government, industry and academia triangle to cooperate and consult on the ways to develop literary tourism better and more sustainable at the regional, national and local levels”, and “encouraging the government and industry to diversify the country’s tourism product by relying on the country’s valuable literary assets”.

#### 4.2.2. Recognizing and Designing Literary Routes

The main theme of designing literary routes includes seven sub-themes: introducing different types of literary routes and paths to tourism activists and tourists, literary routes and paths design of famous travel books, introducing literary geography of literary works and authors, recognizing and revitalizing literary places and routes, introducing literary tourism routes of literary texts, developing a cartography of literary routes and paths, planning tours based on literary routes and paths. In this perspective, a tourism expert wrote that

“literary tourism is a form of cultural tourism that is narrative and creating based on the routes introduced by famous figures. In Iran, it is possible to define tourism routes for each of these poets and philosophers, introduce these routes, and attract tourists in honor of their birthdays and memorials. Of course, defining routes for literary tourism requires doing scientific research, defining basic concepts, and reviving historical identity, and these issues should be considered for the promotion of this form of tourism” [73].

#### 4.2.3. Development of Literary Places

The main theme of the development of literary places included 13 sub-themes: adapting literary works to design and construct literary tourism places, exercising cultural diplomacy to globally recognized literary heritage, constructing symbolic literary places in locations related to national epics, myths and legends, constructing and developing museums, book and literary cities, adapting folklore stories to construct literary places or attractions, reconstructing and recognizing places related to the lives of poets, literary cartography of famous works of Iranian prose and poetry, locating literary attractions based on literary narratives, introducing the places and houses mentioned in literary narratives, reconstructing monuments and literary places while retaining their originality, a proper design of the tomb of literary figures, development and promotion of literary tourism by using the capabilities of literary places, designing literary buildings in accordance with the mood of the personality, prose and poetry of the authors. In this regard, a tourism researcher argued that:

“places that carry the culture and literature of a country with them are the attraction of literary tourism. Literature in Iran is thousands of years old. Thousands of poets, writers, and literates have lived in this land whose houses and tombs can be a meeting place for those interested in literature and tourism” [74].

#### 4.2.4. Promotion of Literary Events

The main theme of the promotion of literary events included seven sub-themes: supporting creativity in holding various cultural and literary performances, promotion of all kinds of literary festivals, holding a memorial and commemoration of literary famous figures, performing various activities in literary places and spaces, holding various literary events in literary cities, introducing literary figures to the world through holding various literary events, promotion of holding all kinds of literary conferences. In these regards, a tourism operator stated that:

“in literary festivals, such as the celebration of Ferdowsi’s birthday ( . . . ) it is necessary to consider aspects of literary tourism in addition to the scientific and literary ones and necessary measures should be taken to expand the sphere of internal influence as well as the sphere of external one at the same time with the literary festival as a literary tourism event” [75].

#### 4.2.5. Teaching and Culturalizing Literary Tourism

The main theme of teaching and culturalizing literary tourism included six sub-themes: enhancing the knowledge of the executive branch of the country by elites and successful entrepreneurs, producing movies and series that promote literary tourism, public incentive programs such as book reading competition of literary works, literary travel writing and encouraging individual creativity, introducing cultural and literary heritage to students by an educational curriculum, enhancing knowledge about new fields in literary tourism, enhancing literary knowledge and public awareness about literary heritage. In this regard, one of the most prominent literary tourism activists in Iran reported that

“our ancient and contemporary literature is now almost faded in the shadow of the literature of other nations and is ignored by different segments of the country, especially the youth. So, to introduce it to the world and strengthen its position in public, it must be thought of in more attractive, creative, and less elitist ways. One of the methods that has many approaches for society is the connection between the tourism industry and the literary heritage of the country” [76].

#### 4.2.6. Literary Tourism Marketing

The main theme of literary tourism marketing included eight sub-themes: offering literary tours in integrated tour packages, using social media for literary tourism marketing, offering literary tours based on accurate knowledge of the market, utilizing the experiences of successful countries in promoting and marketing literary tourism, recognizing the appropriate marketing methods for selling literary tours, using environmental advertising (online and offline) for literary tourism marketing; supporting tourism activists to offer literary tours, as well as offering various cultural-literary tour packages to tourists. In this regard, one of the activists and experts in cultural tourism, emphasizing the technical view on literary tours, said that:

“we go to Tus and Neyshabur and visit the tombs of Khayyam, Attar, Ferdowsi, and Mehdi Akhavan-Sales, but the literary tour has its own meaning and concept. It is a complete specialized tour with special audiences and tour guides specialized in literature and poetry” [77].

#### 4.2.7. Turning the Writers’ Houses into a Literary Tourism Attraction

The main body of this key practical issue can be decomposed in seven sub-themes: building restoration and renovation of the houses of famous poets and writers, protecting and preserving the writers’ houses as the cultural heritage of the country, retaining the authenticity of the writers’ houses as a literary attraction, national registration of famous writers’ houses, removing legal barriers to turning writers’ houses into literary attractions, paying attention to the writers’ houses as tourist attractions in destination marketing programs, turning the writers’ houses into literary museums. In this regard, a report on the house of a contemporary writer stated that:

“in our country, despite the existence of successful and brilliant figures in the world of culture and art, almost no serious action has been taken to preserve the houses of (those) artists . . . The house of Jalal Al-Ahmad’s adolescence ( . . . ) can be a good place for those who are enthusiastic about this author and a place to introduce him to Iranian and non-Iranian cultural tourists” [78].

#### 4.2.8. Preserving Literary Heritage

Preserving literary heritage included three sub-themes: preserving cultural and literary heritage through institutional consensus and collective participation, popularizing the preservation of literary heritage in material and spiritual aspects, involving people in the preservation of literary heritage. In this regard, an official of the tourism sector declared that:

“one of the rich heritage of Iranians ( . . . ) is its literature. Literature is a manifestation of creativity and self-confidence ( . . . ). Literature in the cultural sphere of Iran due to its richness and undeniable diversity ( . . . ) is a treasure that (protection of it) can lead to the promotion of the name of Iran ( . . . ). The link tourism industry and literary heritage needs coherent planning” [79].

#### 4.2.9. Developing Infrastructures for Technical Actions in Literary Tourism

The main theme of developing infrastructures for technical actions in literary tourism included five sub-themes: providing facilities to tourism experts to take action in the field of literary tourism, supporting the activities of experts in the field of literary tourism, creating technical media for tourism, supporting the establishment of technical agencies in the field of cultural/literary tourism, technical training of human resources activities in the field of cultural/literary tourism. In this regard, Mehrvarz [80] in the introduction of his report dealing with ‘identification of literary tourism capacities in Gilan’, argued that:

“today, the tourist attraction industry is competitive around the world and it is increasingly getting technical. So there is a need for advertising, cultural promoting, and giving information (with a technical approach). Iran, with its deep cultural and literary infrastructure, is largely free from the need to create artificial tourism hubs. However, little importance is given to the country’s abundant assets in this area”.

#### 4.2.10. ‘Literary Cartography’ and Designing Literary Tourism Maps

Finally, the main theme of literary cartography and literary mapping was articulated into three sub-themes: literary cartography of literary places and routes, designing tourism maps for famous literary works, literary cartography at various local, regional, and national scales. In this regard, Seyyed Ghasem and Nooh Pisheh (2016), referring to the design of the literary map of Iran, said that:

“the ultimate goal of this project is to design a multi-layered map with research and tourism objectives for all cities of Iran, in which other important components in a literary map such as the birthplace of writers and poets and the place of occurrence of epic narratives have also been considered” (p. 98).

### 5. Discussion

Since the middle of the 20th century, governments have increasingly considered the development of the tourism sector as one of the service industries contributing the most to economic growth. Taken as a pivotal economic sector, tourism is currently recognized as one of the largest (value-added) activities in the world, with huge expansion in many countries and especially in Mediterranean and Middle East regions [81–83]. Various forms of cultural tourism, such as literary tourism, have valuable and extended capacities (i.e., expansion prospects) in comparison with other branches of the tourism sector [84]. Additionally, most experts in tourism studies believe this branch of tourism has fewer negative effects on local communities and the environment, and its development can create new jobs in addition to more traditional forms of tourism [35]. In our study, the analysis of challenges and approaches to the development of literary tourism in Iran provides empirical findings that can pave the way for effective policies in the tourism sector, especially cultural tourism and literary heritage [8]. Such information gives an original contribution to tourism science, since in-depth, narrative studies on literary tourism in the Middle East, and especially in

Iran, are relatively scarce and fragmented, despite the particularly rich cultural heritage already present in these countries [85]. A narrative and comparative approach of different experiences on literary tourism in Iran may finally provide a different ‘cultural’ perspective to a scientific literature often dominated by theoretical contributions and empirical analyses referring to well-established perspectives typical of the most advanced economies in the world [86].

### *5.1. Rethinking ‘Literary Tourism’ as the Engine of Tourism Development in Iran*

Based on the empirical results of the content analysis developed in our study, literary tourism is known as a new form of cultural, heritage, and creative tourism for Iran. This form of tourism covers a wide range of places and literary attractions that includes real, imaginary, and fictional places, movie locations, literary event venues, book cities, literary routes, literary museums, places related to myths and legends, as well as writers’ homes [36]. As in other socioeconomic contexts [3], the inherent diversification of places in literary tourism—being a crucial issue in the recent literature—is also rather marked in Iran. However, although tourism planning has considered this topic with the aim at avoiding one-dimensional and limited interpretations of literary tourism within dedicated development strategies [26], such kinds of strategy are far from being effective (or even applied) in the Iranian context. The weak and fragmented planning ‘culture’ for literary tourism emerges as an important limitation to the continuous growth of such an economic sector in Iran [87].

Results of the content analysis also suggest how the interest for literary tourism in Iran has arisen from various societal factors, such as cultural/literary heritage, literary work, literary and artistic figures, literary places and spaces, artistic places, sense of place, and participation in literary events, in line with earlier studies from other countries [88]. Therefore, in recognizing literary tourists as well as planning, managing, and marketing literary tourism, it is necessary to consider the various motivations of literary tourism [46]. Since literary tourism in the Iranian society has been often ‘limited to visiting the tombs of literary figures’, a more accurate recognition of the concept of literary tourism and its various contexts is required, possibly expanding the cognitive dimensions of literary tourism in society, especially through educational and media institutions [38]. The analyzed information sources seem to converge on the fact that literary tourism—like most forms of tourism—has an ‘interdisciplinary nature’, which is key to the development of positive and normative literature on literary tourism [89]. Within executive and operational levels, it is thus essential to use a wide range of related expertise, especially economics, sociology, geography, planning, humanities/literature, as well as cultural and heritage studies [21]. This aspect is particularly relevant in the context of weak planning and fragmented policies supporting tourism development, such as in Iran [90].

Based on the recognition of ‘challenges’ or ‘issues and problems’ delineated in this study, literary tourism in Iran needs the full support of regional/local governments, tourism authorities, and social/cultural institutions [91], especially enhancing the participation of stakeholders in the development of this tourism sector. Given the weakness of Iran’s current position in the world tourism sector, it is worthwhile to take advantage of the potential in this field [11]. The cultural and literary heritage of the country is a valuable asset for current and future generations and its preservation requires effective country strategies and practical measures at both the regional and local scale [31].

First, literary tourism, like other forms of tourism [5] needs its own facilities and infrastructures, without which it would be useless to talk about the development of literary tourism [17]. On this basis, managers and trustees of the tourism sector as well as local managers in areas with literary attractions should work more intensively to identify and improve (or, even, build up, when necessary) the required facilities and infrastructures for the development of literary tourism [7]. Second, due to the misconception and narrow view of literary tourism, promotion of literary tourism in the Iranian society would benefit from spatially explicit logics [24], possibly in connection with the broader notion of sustainable tourism, an important pillar of any strategy of sustainable development worldwide [92].

### 5.2. 'Literary Tourism' and Sustainable Tourism Development

Our analysis also suggests that a sustainable development of literary tourism in Iran is based on both preservation and synergic use of a variety of literary heritages. Managers and planners of the tourism sector should provide the necessary base for technical actions in the field of literary tourism, especially considering literary cartography and the production of literary maps as one of the practical tools at the base of cultural/literary attractions. In addition, since cultural policies should support literary tourism as a factor contributing to the expansion of cultural diplomacy and the progress of literature and arts [9], the country's officials and political managers should promote the development of literary tourism more intensively with the aim at boosting the country's economy. With rising cultural/literary awareness and a more effective promotion of national unity, the empirical findings of our study have important implications for, at least, three public/private stakeholders [93]. They include (i) the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism of Iran, (ii) town councils and municipal authorities of cities with potential for literary tourism such as Tehran, Shiraz, Tabriz, Neishabour, Mashhad, Hamedan, Abadan, among others, and, finally, (iii) private agencies involved in cultural and literary tourism planning, management, marketing, and development [80]. Their role in promoting a national plan for literary tourism in Iran is evident, especially when tracing regional strategies and more articulated local actions. Particular attention should be dedicated to strategies and measures specifically addressing the complexity of literary tourism development in urban districts and in rural areas, as a possible contribution to the sustainable development of tourism sectors in Iran.

In urban societies, stimulating the demand for literary tourism in local communities requires an intense education program realized via appropriate cultural institutions [35]. The development of the literary tourism market and its thorough promotion also require creating literary tour packages—likely through appropriate marketing campaigns. Monuments dedicated to literary writers and prominent cultural figures are one of the most promising areas of interest in the development of literary tourism [59]. Writers' houses are known as one of the most valuable literary heritage attractions [33], whose preservation, renovation, and development is one of the most important assets for the development of literary tourism all over the world and especially in the Middle East.

In rural areas, the linkage between literary tourism and sustainable development requires more in-depth study [94]. On the one hand, it is clear how the phenomenon of literary tourism can feed an economic chain of great interest for marginal and peripheral territories with low population density [91]. On the other hand, it is also documented how any form of tourism—even exercised through small numbers of visitors—may have negative implications for the environment and the structure of local societies [95]. The increased tourist demand associated with the promotion of places with a strong 'literary' vocation, in fact, requires the improvement of roads and railways increasing accessibility, new residential and productive settlements, hotels and restaurants, which contribute to local well-being [17]. These activities in turn consolidate anthropogenic pressures on landscapes and natural resources, especially in places that are often of high environmental value [96]. The intimate linkage of literary tourism with sustainable development in Iran requires the design of integrated policies and an operational project enhancing tourist sites specialized in a 'literary' form of tourism supply on a national scale, with local intervention plans to mitigate any environmental impact [23].

### 5.3. The Methodological Issue: The Power of Narrative Analysis and the Need for Quantitative Surveys

To what extent qualitative results, basically derived from an extensive literature review, are relevant to the specific aim of this study is an argument of particular interest, especially when a generalization of this type of research to other socioeconomic contexts with a similar literary tourism background is requested [14]. Total (or partial) lack of quantitative data made use of literature reviews (and other secondary (non-statistical) information sources) quite indispensable. Primary sources such as field surveys and interviews seem to be also

appropriate to delineate the main picture and the issues at stake in the socioeconomic context of Iran. Clearly, the representativeness of this picture and the related problems and research questions should be carefully verified case by case. A validation scheme is particularly appropriate in this context and future research should cope extensively with this issue. Replication of qualitative methodologies—such as the one proposed in our study—is finally possible in other geographical areas, while clearly maintaining the role of cultural specificities possibly influencing the final results of the survey [32].

When operationally possible and scientifically appropriate, mixing quantitative and qualitative methodologies remains an effective approach to the complex issues at stake, varying largely over both time and space dimensions. Classification of literary tourism issues—mainly initiatives and experiences—is a topical argument that is addressed in this study. The intrinsic subjectivity of our classification approach can be improved in future studies with more structured—and generalized—categorization, possibly valid in different socioeconomic contexts and for distinctive literary tourism backgrounds. Our proposal provides the necessary technical and scientific background for more analytic and comprehensive frameworks. These assumptions definitely state the importance of comparative studies involving more countries/regions and covering different tourism experiences [10].

Improvements in qualitative analysis methodologies used for merging themes and sub-themes, and a broader discussion on the relevance of such approaches for scientific research are appropriate in this direction. Mixed approaches based on the integration of different operational perspectives seem to be particularly suitable, e.g., using inverted decision trees [97], with the involvement of recognized experts in the appropriate research field, e.g., tourism development and management, regional development and tourism connectivity [98–100]. Such frameworks will provide improved tools identifying dimensions and synthesizing themes and sub-themes, giving value to the original content of the empirical work and reducing the intrinsic degree of subjectivity. In this line of thinking, the increased availability of official statistics and more precise surveys from administrative sources or from (economic) sampling surveys [101] inevitably represent the necessary information background to support any sustainable development plan for literary tourism in Iran, grounded as well on a broad qualitative investigation of recent patterns and trends.

Design of efficient planning for the integrated development of territories with a high vocation of 'literary' tourism finally implies an increased availability of official statistics and quantitative data sources addressing this phenomenon. Currently, such data appear unfrequently available at regional and local scales in Middle Eastern countries, and quite restricted at national level (as in other regions of the world including advanced economies [102]). An appropriate action plan can thus benefit from the results of preliminary, qualitative studies based on literature analyses. The study presented in this commentary provides an operational framework of a qualitative nature, proposing a possible taxonomy of the different forms of literary tourism in Iran—which can be extended and generalized to other socioeconomic contexts in the Middle East [8].

#### *5.4. Policy Implications*

Overcoming the current challenges and planning literary tourism in Iran means paying attention to operational approaches and strategic development choices [103]. These may include (i) choosing a coherent strategy to facilitate the development and promotion of literary tourism; (ii) adopting an effective diplomacy for cultural collaboration and interaction with other nations of the world; (iii) applying a clear operational strategy for the sustainable protection of the country's literary heritage; and, finally, (iv) enhancing the potential contribution of literary tourism in other forms of tourism through literary routes, events, museums, international exhibitions, festivals, and literary initiatives. Municipalities with 'literary' places should provide the necessary conditions for the participation of local communities and entrepreneurs in the field of literary tourism, considering motivational

factors and social incentives to stimulate creativity in the development of various forms of literary tourism [104].

Moreover, interventions for the visual improvement of the aesthetic quality of literary tourism places should be planned and undertaken with due urgency, especially in socioeconomic contexts with landscapes dominated by informal settlements, e.g., in rapidly growing fringe cities [105]. Travel agencies should use a suitable strategy in the field of marketing cultural tourism destinations, delineating a refined literary tourism market segmentation, with the final aim at offering tourism products in accordance with the demand of different market segments. From the operational perspective, such a plan should also avoid an excessive tourist specialization of a few districts, which reflects a socioeconomic polarization in dynamic and marginal areas fueling increased territorial disparities [81]. On the contrary, literary tourism is the basis of a polycentric and spatially balanced tourism development [92], based on the consolidation of several localities with cultural attractions both in urban environments and in more rural and marginal conditions. In the context of sustainable development, literary tourism should be regarded as a powerful engine of territorial balancing [40]), favoring e.g., the convergence of marginal rural areas with economically dynamic districts.

## 6. Conclusions

Empirical findings of applied research distinguishing different ‘approaches’ to the inherent development of literary tourism in Iran represent a novel contribution to the international literature on this important form of tourism. Based on empirical evidence, statements that emphasize the multiplicity and heterogeneity of strategies facing promotion of this tourism sector are another original contribution to the sustainable development of literary tourism in Iran and, possibly, in the Middle East area. Like the whole tourism sector, literary tourism needs the support of the government and the facilitating role of its institutions. Managers and planners of the tourism sector should set agendas recognizing (and designing) literary routes as one of the most important attractions of creative literary tourism. They should identify literary places and spaces (e.g., ‘literary geography’) as the main pillar of literary tourism and implement effective strategies and executive measures aimed at developing literary tourism, taking advantage of the promotion of literary events as one of the fundamental measures for sustainable development of literary tourism.

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