

BOOK REVIEW

The Making of Persianate Modernity: Language and Literary History between Iran and India

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As rigorous as it is refreshing, Alexander Jabbari's *The Making of Persianate Modernity: Language and Literary History between Iran and India* will both challenge and delight readers interested in the modern history of literary and intellectual exchange in the Persianate world. Despite coming in at less than 200 pages, this compact volume packs a punch. Among other things, it reinvigorates debates over the meaning and value of the term “Persianate,” builds on a budding interest in the *tazkira* as a literary genre, and makes a compelling and original argument regarding the enduring nature of multilingual literary exchange between India and Iran well into the 20th century. Conceptually ambitious and dexterous in execution, the book offers readers a wealth of new ideas and methodologies that force a reconsideration of the directionality and temporality of intellectual exchange between these two regions.

As its title suggests, the book centers on the concept of “Persianate modernity”: just what it might be, and how it was made. Jabbari pursues these questions by taking on what he considers a quintessentially modern genre, the literary history. How, he asks, did the earlier tradition of biographical poetic anthologies, or *tazkiras* (typically produced with court patronage), become transformed into a new tradition of national literary histories (typically produced in modern universities)? The story of the transition from *tazkira* to literary history, Jabbari argues, reveals a broader tale of how the cosmopolitan world of the Persianate was sliced, diced, and repackaged into discrete national literatures that obscured Persian's long and expansive history across what Shahab Ahmed calls the Balkans-to-Bengal complex. Jabbari argues that it was this repackaging that produced Persianate modernity. For him, Persianate modernity is “the form the Persianate takes after [these] transformations ... the connected framework left over from the bygone cosmopolis that enabled intellectuals from Iran and India to learn from each other in their modernizing projects and to rework the literary texts of the earlier tradition into a national heritage” (p. 7).

Though his focus is on poetic anthologies and literary histories, in truth, Jabbari is concerned with a wider intellectual and political history that was reflected in, and shaped by, scholarly writings on literature. While the book does offer important insights for the study of Persian literary history proper, its most original and compelling aspect is its account of the exchange between modern South Asia and Iran. Against a persistent tendency to read literary history through nationalist frameworks, Jabbari demonstrates how “Persian literary history emerged out of collaboration between Indians and Iranians” (p. 9). Even more provocatively, he insists upon, and amply proves, the “crucial role of Urdu for literary modernizers in both Iran and South Asia” (p. 4). Thus, the development of the Persian literary history genre—and thus Persianate modernity itself—cannot be understood without examining both Urdu and Persian sources. In making this claim, *The Making of Persianate*

Modernity smashes through the walls of both nationalist and area studies paradigms, which would keep Persian and Urdu apart.

These arguments, carefully outlined in the book's introduction, are elaborated in the four main chapters, each of which methodically documents the mechanics by which Persian literary histories came to be produced through the multilingual interaction of Indian and Iranian scholars. The chapters are organized thematically rather than chronologically, with each taking up a different aspect of the manufacturing of Persianate modernity. The first chapter explores how the modern literary history emerged from the *tazkira*. It is followed by a chapter on how a new generation of modern scholars attempted to tame the *tazkira*'s "frank, unabashed depictions of homoerotic sexuality" through a studied "bashful silence" that was produced in part by an engagement with Victorian thought (p. 27). The third chapter asks how modernizers theorized the origins of Persian and Urdu to "demonstrate how historically contingent the dominant narratives around Persian and Urdu" are (p. 27). The last chapter takes up the transition from manuscript to print culture, zooming in on the adaptation of formal print conventions in Persianate languages. Jabbari here raises a host of questions about the cultural politics of question marks and other similarly overlooked textual minutiae. His careful examination of the development of print will have scholars of Urdu and Persian reassessing the very punctuation marks that appear in the texts they themselves study. Rather than being merely pragmatic, he argues, the stylistic and orthographic changes that accompanied the shift to print were influenced by more subjective "networks of affective attachments" (p. 28). This chapter, which compares the development of print in Iran and South Asia, is a particularly excellent companion to recent scholarship on the development of lithographic traditions in Urdu.¹

A key facet of Jabbari's writing that spans each of these thematic case studies is a concern to relocate and recentralize the place of Persianate writing produced outside Iran. Jabbari here pushes forward Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi's pathbreaking work on Persian between India and Iran in the 18th century to argue that the Persianate in fact "never fully disappeared from the subcontinent" (p. 8). He rejects the supposition, famously proposed by Tavakoli-Targhi, that Persian texts from India were "homeless," accepted by neither Indians nor Iranians. Rather, they were always read in India, though commentaries on them were increasingly produced in Urdu rather than Persian. In other words, South Asia's link to Persian was not lost; it was simply mediated through Urdu. "Urdu," Jabbari rightly avows, "is vital to the story of the emergence of Persian literary history" (p. 26).

This argument is one of the most novel and refreshing claims of the book. While the idea that Indians were critical to the writing of Persian literary history may not be a bombshell—at least not to scholars of Persianate South Asia—Jabbari's assertion of the crucial role played by Urdu in the construction of modern Iranian literary history will surely be a revelation to many, if not most, readers. (Giving future scholars a nudge, a mini-chapter called "Connections" details myriad forms of exchange, many of them nonliterary, between Iran and South Asia in the 20th century.) It is these insights that are most likely to inspire a flurry of new studies and to push the field in new directions. Jabbari argues, in essence, that in writing about the Persianate, it is insufficient to think and speak about Persian alone.

The Making of Persianate Modernity ambitiously aims to speak directly and equally to scholars of both modern Iranian and South Asian literary and cultural history. Unfortunately, these two regions are now rarely studied together for the modern period, leaving Jabbari with the challenging task of fashioning a language and apparatus to address two fields simultaneously. He does so admirably. Most of his readers will come to the book from one "side"

¹ Recent work from South Asia on this topic includes Ulrike Stark, "Letters Beautiful and Harmful: Print, Education, and the Issue of Script in Colonial North India," *Paedagogica Historica* 55, no. 6 (2019): 829–53; Amanda Lanzillo, "Translating the Scribe: Lithographic Print and Vernacularization in Colonial India, 1857–1915," *Comparative Critical Studies* 16, no. 2–3 (2019): 281–300; and Megan Eaton Robb, *Print and the Urdu Public: Muslims, Newspapers, and Urban Life in Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

or the other. Jabbari seems to have realized this and, rather than launch directly into his arguments, he writes systematically, carefully building up his narrative. He defines every term and concept he uses, from “the Persianate” on down. He provides further support through the inclusion of a succinct *dramatis personae* of the figures he studies, most of whom—like Shibli Nu‘mani in India or Muhammad-Taqi Bahar in Iran—are well-known in their respective regions, but not necessarily beyond them. The book also deserves plaudits for seemingly not containing a single typographical, translational, or transliteration error, no small feat for a book that weaves constantly among three languages. This too is a great aid for readers who may struggle with unfamiliar terms and benefit from this level of precision. In short, the quality, accessibility, and—above all—the originality of its argument makes *The Making of Persianate Modernity* mandatory reading and establishes Jabbari as a key interlocutor for scholars interested in modern Persian and Urdu literature and South Asian and Iranian history.