

The Making of Persianate Modernity: Language and Literary History between Iran and India. Alexander Jabbari (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023). 260 pp. ISBN 9781009320863

Reviewed by Samuel Hodgkin , Yale University, New Haven, CT

(Received 16 November 2023; accepted 19 November 2023)

This accomplished monograph provides a fundamentally new account of the intertwined metamorphoses of the Persian and Urdu verbal arts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a special focus on literary historiography and the intellectual history of linguistics. These transformations are situated within a wider field of transformation from Khiva and Anatolia to the Bay of Bengal and the Deccan, placing the story of Persian and Urdu within a distinctively Persianate story of literary and linguistic modernity. In this larger context, Jabbari is able to provide substantially new readings of major writers, including the literary scholarship of Riza-Quli Khan Hidayat, Muhammad Husayn Azad, Muhammad-Taqi Bahar, Shibli Nu'mani, E. G. Browne, the Furughis (both father and son), and Badi' al-Zaman Furuzanfar. There also are striking rereadings of major poets, such as N. M. Rashid and Sayyid Muhammad-'Ali Jamalzadah, as well as many contributions to the reception history of classical poets and scholars. As this reviewer is less qualified to evaluate the book's contribution to Urdu literary criticism and historiography, and particularly since this review is intended to serve the readers of *Iranian Studies*, I will focus on Jabbari's contribution to the study of Persian literature, while acknowledging the ways in which this book complicates such distinctions.

The Making of Persianate Modernity is one of the first in a cluster of new monographs that situate the emergence of modern Persian literature in larger and more fluid contexts than that of monolingual, national Iranian literary history. This orientation is signaled in the first instance by the phrase "Persianate modernity." The replacement of the literary category of modernism with that of modernity (and sometimes "literary modernity") marks a generational shift, in which scholars have begun to investigate the genealogy of literary-critical categories once taken to be self-evident, such as modern, modernist, literature, India, and Iran. Whereas the Cold War Western teleology of literary modernization produced literary histories that began with traditional literary forms and topics and ended with the triumph of global forms such as free verse and the novel, these new studies emphasize the infrastructural shifts that propagated Western literary forms, but also radically changed the circumstances for the composition and reception of other forms that came to be regarded as traditional. New print and broadcast media, civic and state-managed projects of script and language reform, state schooling, and, crucially, the institution of national literary history as such: these shifts, long understood as the background to more properly literary transformations, have come to the center of the story.

Jabbari's book follows several Western and Iranian studies over the past two decades—both in literary criticism and in the historiography of nationalism—that have treated national literature as an institution and have traced its emergence through transnational networks of writers and scholars, new civil society organizations and state educational institutions, and histories and anthologies of Persian literature based on Western Orientalist models. However, this book distinguishes itself in two important ways. First, the book challenges, and often successfully evades, the category of the modular nation. It deals with the relationship between Persian and Urdu linguistic-literary transformation through very successful comparisons (why did North Indian and Pakistani print media hold tight to nastaliq

script, whereas Iran abandoned it for *naskh* typefaces?), but also through *histoire croisée*. This is crucial, given the numerous writers, scholars, civic activists, and state officials who operated in both Iran and India or who borrowed models or texts from the other zone, not to mention the continued role of Persian in the verbal arts of Muslim South Asia down to the present day. For the activists who transitioned away from regional and confessional affiliations to identify with monolingual nations and then attempted to actualize them, the elements of comparison and entanglement were both always present, and Jabbari alternates deftly between comparison and reintegration of Iran/India and Persian/Urdu.

Second, the book emerges less from nationalism studies than from conversations in cultural studies about modernity and language. Drawing on the reception and adaptation of Foucault by scholars such as Frederick Cooper, Jabbari considers modernity not as a real temporality but as “a discourse about what it means to be modern” (44). If this definition seems circular, this is entirely appropriate, given the degree to which appearances and aesthetics set the stakes for modernization. In an age of colonialism and mandates, convincing European arbiters that a nation had achieved modernity and no longer required guidance by means of a hat law or a tomb for a national poet might seem as crucial for that nation’s political fate as industrialization or the regularization of a tax code.

Language reform occupies a middle position between these categories since, as Jabbari shows, the advocates of national modernization regarded matters of language and script as both aesthetically and technologically important. The book consistently treats print technologies, languages, and systems of writing and punctuation as objects of contention in themselves, even in debates about other topics whose protagonists assumed language to be a neutral communicative medium. However, here, as in his discussion of modernity, Jabbari deploys theoretical resources with a light touch, never letting the book’s methodological engagements bog down its case-specific story and argument.

The introduction lays out Jabbari’s distinctive approach to the historiographic categories discussed above, as well as the basic forms with which the book is concerned (manuscripts and various printing technologies; the *tazkirah* and its modern successor genres). It concludes with a discussion of the impact of area studies on Persianate studies that will be widely cited. Beyond the arbitrariness and inadequacy of area studies categories (to which surveys in Persianate, Islamicate, and Central Eurasian studies must ritually gesture), Jabbari has in mind a problematic mindset specific to the tradition of Middle Eastern philology, one which colleagues in other area studies fields have already moved beyond. In Middle East studies, “privileged trajectories of language”—and specifically an established *hierarchy* of languages—structure scholars’ understanding of reception and influence (15). Therefore every Persianist is expected to be alert to Arabic literary influence, but not the reverse; scholars of Urdu must be aware of Persian and Arabic literature, but Arabists and Persianists typically remain still more ignorant of Urdu than of Turkic literature. This state of affairs he contrasts with the situation in East Asian studies, in which, despite a similar classical linguistic hierarchy, scholars understand the crucial role of Japanese institutions and texts in the making of Chinese modernity. In this spirit, before the core book chapters, there follows a brief prosopographical itinerary through some of the most significant social and intertextual links between Iranian and Indian projects of modernization.

Of the four core chapters of the book, the first three deal primarily with literary historiography. The first, a study of the relationship between national literary history and its precursor genres, establishes the grounds for the more thematically focused second and third chapters. The chapter’s subtitle, “From *Tazkirah* to Literary History,” might suggest a similar narrative to previous accounts by Afshin Marashi and Farzin Vejdani. However, this book pays more attention than previous literary historiographies to the strange and exciting possibilities suggested by the intermediate products, such as Shibli Nu‘mani’s *Shi‘r al-‘Ajam*, and shows how, even in later textbooks, some elements of the *tazkirah* tradition remain.


Nonetheless, it is in the following chapters that Jabbari most clearly enters onto new ground. The second chapter, a study of the impact of Victorian prudery on understandings

of the Persianate literary past, tells very similar stories in Iran and India, whereas the third chapter, on the arrival of Orientalist preoccupations with literary origins, is a study in contrast. In the former case, this book's most notable contribution is to show that it is not only the classical Persianate presentation of sexuality that is highly conventional. Just as the pederastic scenarios of traditional poetry only sometimes reflected social realities, Jabbari highlights the gap between Browne and Shibli Nu'mani's scrupulous excision of homoeroticism from the canon and their more adventurous private lives. Modern literary history, he shows, "like literature itself, . . . can sometimes be completely detached from life experiences" (97). The third chapter sets Iranian scholars' growing preoccupation in the early twentieth century with purity of origins—the search for continuities between "Old Persian" (Avestan), the various idioms treated as "Middle Persian," and the Persian language and literature of the Islamic period—in contrast with Urdu scholars' embrace of hybrid origins. The reasons for this divergence are clear enough: Islam became a sign of national difference in India, so traces of Arabic became important to Urdu-writing Indian scholars just as they became embarrassing to Iranian scholars.

The final chapter turns to the role of grammatology in Persianate modernity, with a scrupulous attention to the *nuqāt* (finer points) of orthography, scripts, lithography, typesetting, and, in the book's greatest tour de force, punctuation. Here, as in the third chapter, each case study is used to draw out paths not taken in the other case. By clearing away a series of persistent myths, including the superiority of Latin script to Arabic for purposes of literacy and the impossibility of a nastaliq print culture, Jabbari leaves the reader with a sense of the contingency of outcomes in national language reforms that have often been regarded as inevitable. The book concludes with a final reflection on the ongoing asymmetry of knowledge between Persian scholars and Urdu scholars today, including in Iranian and Pakistani academia. It is Persian studies, it seems, that needed the category of the Persianate, to recover a horizon of possibility that South Asian scholars had never forgotten.

doi:10.1017/irn.2023.68

Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry, Levi Thompson, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 231 pages. £75.00. ISBN: 978-1-009-16447-4

Reviewed by Samad Josef Alavi , University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway (samad.alavi@ikos.uio.no)

(Received 4 January 2024; accepted 4 January 2024)

Levi Thompson's *Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry* argues for a new understanding of Persian and Arabic modernist poetry that considers the two languages' shared literary heritage, the poetries' common mythologies with Mesopotamian origins, and the poets' own sense of transnational and anti-imperialist solidarities to be more important than Western influence, which, according to the author, has received disproportionate attention in previous studies. Published as part of the Cambridge Studies in World Literature series, the book challenges criteria like "canon, prestige, or economic power" for determining which works gain entry into a single body of "World Literature" (p. 96). Instead, Thompson's study demonstrates the possibility of seeing the simultaneity of independent but concurrently developing literatures within global literary systems. Accordingly, Thompson proposes a revised geography of the modernist poetries studied in the book,