

## AFTERWORD

# Afterword to Persianate Pasts, National Presents: Persian Literary and Cultural Production in the Twentieth Century

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What is the relevance of the Persianate as a category of analysis in a world wherein even world literature continues to be framed as the literary history of discrete nations? First coined by historian Marshall Hodgson in 1974, Persianate initially referred to cultures such as Georgian, Armenian, Chaghatay, Urdu, and Ottoman, which were heavily influenced lexically and culturally by Persian without themselves being related to Persian linguistically.<sup>1</sup> Gradually, an additional meaning was grafted onto “Persianate,” which referenced cultures such as Judeo-Persian that were linguistically Persian but culturally diverse, bearing multiple alphabets, religions, and identities. These two meanings—the first grounded in cultural affinity and the second in linguistic origins—complement each other and ensure that the concept of the Persianate is reducible neither to language nor to identity.

Yet for those who have not been swept up in the Persianate turn, including many outside the Euro-American academy, the word “Persianate” still lacks a clear referent.<sup>2</sup> Iranians, Afghans, Tajiks, and South Asians transliterate into English the same words differently, transposing the same signifieds into divergent signs. In deference to these regional differences, sympathetic—or sometimes simply bewildered—outsiders often reframe the Persian language more locally and colloquially as Dari, Tajik, and Farsi. Such reframing under the aegis of national boundaries promotes the perception that these literatures and cultures, which rely on the same cultural referents, could be studied in isolation from each other.

The articles in this special issue refute the tendency to homogenize the literatures of Western and Central Asia as Persian, on the one hand, and to fragment them as a hodgepodge of discrete national formations, on the other. In vastly different yet interconnected ways, they reveal the relevance of the category of the Persianate after nationalism has ineluctably shaped the meaning and value of the term. In exploring the trajectory of the Persianate over the course of the long twentieth century, these articles compel us to think differently about utility of vernacular modes of expression that are inflected by, yet not wholly contained within, nation-based rubrics. While Hodgkin, Massoumi, and Loy examine the creation of transregional idioms through various institutions of Persianate culture—such as the anthology, the radio, and the periodical—Fani and Jabbari examine how intellectuals from the Persianate periphery shaped a dominant Persianate culture. In

<sup>1</sup> Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 293–94.

<sup>2</sup> Kaveh Hemmat is among those who have recently tracked this turn in “Completing the Persianate Turn.”

his examination of nineteenth-century university calendars and courses, Bruce shows how colonial universities in India helped to establish Persian studies as a discipline. Malekzadeh shows us how postrevolutionary Iran's educational curriculum tracks "continuities and permutations" in depictions of foreign others, whether Arab Muslims or Europeans and Americans.

Collectively, these authors show us how the concept of the Persianate encompassed the heterogenous registers of Farsi, Dari, and Tajik well into modernity, even after the demise of a premodern Persianate ethos that encompassed literary culture from Bosnia to Bangladesh.

While Persianate literatures follow a centrifugal trajectory in modernity, Turkic and Arabic literatures have tended to move in a centripetal direction, in the direction of greater consolidation and centralization. In their movement toward homogenization and standardization, Turkic and Arabic literary histories are regularly presented as unified wholes, even when they are internally diverse. The same might be said for English, under the aegis of the "global Anglophone," a label that erases differences in the pursuit of globalization. Meanwhile, Persianate culture has been increasingly fragmented in modernity, notwithstanding the great degree of linguistic continuity among Persianate registers. While Farsi and Dari are allocated to separate literary geographies, they are mutually comprehensible. For all intents and purposes, the Tajik spoken in Tajikistan, the Dari spoken in Afghanistan, and the Farsi spoken in Iran are regional variations on the same Persianate idiom.

Although we lament the loss of the cosmopolitan ethos that seemed to be embedded within Persianate pasts, in fact the concept of the Persianate was invented to serve modern needs, after the partial demise of the worlds it referenced. Even the word "Persian," from which "Persianate" derives, is not easily captured by a single word in the language to which it refers, which is instead divided up into the regional categories of *farsi*, *dari*, and *tajiki*. To call the Persianate a product of the modern imagination is not, however, to equate it with falsehood. Often, things are first named only once their absence becomes palpable.

Whereas previously continuity among the various registers of the Persianate world could simply be assumed, the reconfiguration of heterogeneous Persianate tongues in modernity required a single word to encompass them all. Claiming this concept as modern means recognizing how the cosmopolitan ethos intrinsic in the idea of the Persianate serves uniquely modern needs. It also means underscoring why the values the Persianate embeds may be worth reviving again. One modern need to which the Persianate corresponds is our longing for a community that is not subject to the exclusionary boundary-making of the nation-state. Another contribution made by the Persianate in modernity is in creating spaces for those who occupy the peripheries of empires, who do not fit into the linguistic, cultural, or political mainstream.

The articles in this special issue return us to another dimension of the Persianate, which is rooted in the original linguistic meaning of *ʿajam*, the premodern Arabic word for Persians and other non-Arabs. The term *ʿajam* has been appropriated by many indigenous peoples on the margins of the Muslim world, not only in Persianate domains, but also in the Arabophone Caucasus and Africa, to describe their languages as recorded in the Arabic script.<sup>3</sup> We need not look far to understand the appeal of the concept of *ʿajam*—originally meanings mute and deaf and later signifying outsider and foreigner—in a world of xenophobic confrontation. Analogously the word for "barbarian" in many languages of antiquity was also associated with the foreign and exotic.<sup>4</sup> Being a barbarian, argues Indian philosopher Sudipta Kaviraj—occupying the position of the one who is called *ʿajami*—confers certain epistemic advantages on the observer.<sup>5</sup>

The reconfiguration of this etymology across time and space was a process led by the authors, editors, and scholars whose lives and work are documented in this special issue. It is a transformation that reveals the contributions that non-Iranian Persians of the

<sup>3</sup> The world of African *ʿajam* is discussed in Ngom, *Muslims beyond the Arab World*. *ʿajam* in the Caucasus is discussed in Gammer, ed., *Written Culture in Daghestan*, 17–40.

<sup>4</sup> See Boletsi, *Barbarism and Its Discontents*.

<sup>5</sup> Kaviraj, "On the Advantages of Being a Barbarian."

Persianate world made—and continue to make—to Persian culture and to world literature. The contributors to this special issue take the peripheral consciousness inscribed into the concept of *‘ajam* one step further in time and space, and situate it in a world of nations, dominated not just by Iran but by Russia and the Soviet Union (Hodgkin and Loy), Afghanistan (Fani and Massoumi), the Arab world (Malekzadeh), and South Asia and Iran (Jabbari and Bruce).

The hegemony of nations contributes to numerous anomalous configurations within modern scholarship, including the ongoing marginality of modern Afghan writers within the Persian literary canon, and the relative absence of Tajik, modern Dari, and other non-Iranian Persianate literatures within Persian studies. Sometimes posited as a panacea to nationalisms past and present, the concept of the Persianate can widen the field of Iranian studies and reveal the numerous intersections of Persian literature with Soviet, Central, and South Asian studies. The takes on Persian literary culture from the Persianate peripheries offered by Jabbari, Hodgkin, Loy, Fani, Massoumi, Bruce, and Malekzadeh bring into relief the ongoing value of Persianate cosmopolitanism to our post-colonial and post-national presents. Cultural and ethnic outsiders are most at home along the peripheries of Persianate literary culture: in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and throughout the Caucasus. By virtue of being detached from sharply delineated national borders, the Persianate ethos complicates and even calls into question modern geopolitics.

In their introduction, Schwartz and Fani rightly caution us against “reifying or centralizing the Persianate.” It is imperative that we not replace the totalizations of Eurocentric nationalism with an equally totalizing Persianate rubric which ignores layers of Turkic, Pashto, Urdu, and other South Asian literary cultures that have always shaped the literary landscapes of West, Central, and South Asia. At the same time, far from surrendering to modernity’s monolingualism, we can read texts from Iran, Afghanistan, Central and South Asia, and the Caucasus in light of the Persianate contexts and cultures within which they have long been embedded.

Where Persian is singular, the Persianate is plural. Reading the contemporary moment through the lens of Persianate culture—taking plurality as a norm rather than a special case or an anomaly—means reenvisioning geographic constellations that we all too often take for granted. By recognizing the coherence, the cogency, and the contingency of Persianate cultures across Eurasia well into the twenty-first century, we decenter the nationalisms in our own midst. At its best, engaging with the concept of the Persianate in an era riven by conflicting nationalisms and perpetual imbalances of power can help us respond to Walter Benjamin’s mandate: if we want to write in the tradition of the oppressed, we must learn to brush history against the grain.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.

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