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From Persianate Cosmopolis to Persianate Modernity: Translating from Urdu to Persian in Twentieth-Century Iran and Afghanistan

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Abstract

This article examines twentieth-century Persian translations of Urdu-language works about Persian literature, focusing on two different Persian translations of an influential Urdu-language work on Persian literary history, *Shi'r al-'Ajam* (*Poetry of the Persians*), by Shibli Nu'mani. The article offers a close, comparative reading of the Afghan and Iranian translations of *Shi'r al-'Ajam* in order to understand why two Persian translations of this voluminous text were published within such a short time period. These translations reveal how Indians, Afghans, and Iranians were invested in the same Persianate heritage, yet the emergence of a “Persianate modernity” undergirded by a cultural logic of nationalism rather than cosmopolitanism, along with Iran’s and Afghanistan’s differing relationships to India and Urdu, produced distinct approaches to translation.

Keywords: Persian literature; Urdu; Iran; Afghanistan; translation; Persianate; nationalism; *adab*

Introduction

Iran, Afghanistan, and South Asia have deep historic ties, and connections between them remain more salient in the modern period than is commonly understood. Over the past two decades, a new wave of scholarship has begun to break down the disciplinary divide between Iranian studies and South Asian studies, as scholars have paid increasing attention to modern Indo-Iranian connections in what some have recently termed the “Persianate turn.”¹ Some have focused on exchange between Iranians and Indian Zoroastrians (Parsis).² Others have located the roots of Iranian nationalism and modernization projects in India.³ These scholars laid important ground and successfully challenged nationalist paradigms that had long defined Iranian studies. However, by engaging only with Persian-language sources at the expense of Urdu materials, they have ignored the important role of South Asian Muslims in modern Iranian intellectual and literary trends, failing to recognize bilateral exchange between Persian and Urdu rather than unilateral “influence.”⁴ This

¹ Khazeni, *The City and the Wilderness*, 3; Hemmat, “Completing the Persianate Turn.”

² Ringer, *Pious Citizens*; Grigor, “Persian Architectural Revivals”; Marashi, *Exile and the Nation*.

³ Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*; Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran*.

⁴ This parallels earlier trends in comparative scholarship on India and the Malay Archipelago, in which cultural transmission was seen as unidirectionally originating in India; see Ricci, *Islam Translated*, 11.

topic has been even more neglected in South Asian studies. Though Islamic religious networks connecting Iran and South Asia have been the subject of serious scholarly research, literary and intellectual connections between the two have been comparatively overlooked.⁵ Most recently, innovative monographs have sought to bring together Iranian studies and South Asian studies.⁶ They make valuable contributions, but as these books rely exclusively on Persian-language sources, they have the same blind spot for Urdu as the existing Iranian studies scholarship. Yet Urdu-language scholarship played an important role for the emergence of national literature and literary history in Iran and Afghanistan.

Historically, Persian was hugely influential on Urdu in ways similar to the impact of Arabic on New Persian; Urdu borrowed its script and a large proportion of its vocabulary from Persian, while Persian literature also offered Urdu important literary forms and a repertoire of imagery and references.⁷ In the modern period, there has been a significant amount of translation from Persian into Urdu. As Urdu and other “vernacular” languages took the place that Persian had once held as a language of letters in South Asia, institutions like Fort William College in Calcutta and organizations like the Anjuman-i Taraqqi-yi Urdu (Association for the Progress of Urdu) across India (and, later, Pakistan) attempted to bring the Persian literary corpus into Urdu through translation.⁸ While translations from Urdu into Persian have historically been less common, some have nevertheless had an outsized impact and are worthy of study. Iranians’ engagement with English dominates the field of Persian translation studies, but the impact of Urdu on Persian has received scant attention.⁹ Indian influences on Iranian languages and literatures are mostly acknowledged in studies of late antiquity, such as the translations of the *Panchatantra* from Sanskrit into Middle Persian in the Sasanian period,¹⁰ or a relatively limited number of Middle Persian loans from Sanskrit. Scholarship in South Asian studies has also increasingly addressed the Mughal-era translations from Indic languages like Sanskrit and Braj into Persian,¹¹ but twentieth-century translations from Urdu into Persian belong to different circumstances, different epistemological conditions, and reflect a different understanding of translation. Whereas early modern translations were often patronized by the courts, the twentieth-century translations were produced under the aegis of modern educational institutions.

Scholars of Afghanistan have paid closer attention to the influence of Urdu on modern Afghan culture, and there is no question that Urdu has historically played a more salient role for Afghans than for Iranians.¹² Knowledge of the language is much more widespread in Afghanistan than in Iran. Prominent Afghan political figures like the poet and foreign minister Mahmud Tarzi (1865–1933) were conversant in Urdu, and Afghans often learned Urdu through living in India or economic and educational exchange with the country.¹³ Yet this difference between Iran and Afghanistan may also have to do with the different character of official nationalism in the two countries. The prominent role of Pashtun nationalism in forming the modern Afghan state and the fact that Pashtun nationalists imagined themselves as a single people living on both sides of the Durand Line in Afghanistan and British India (now Pakistan) cannot be ignored. While the Baluch people were similarly divided between Iran and British India (today’s Pakistan), they have played no such role

⁵ Green, *Bombay Islam*; Fuchs, *In a Pure Muslim Land*.

⁶ Kia, *Persianate Selves*; Schwartz, *Remapping Persian Literary History*.

⁷ Matthews, “Urdu”; Shackle, “Persian Elements.”

⁸ On the Anjuman-i Taraqqi-yi Urdu, see Amstutz, “Finding a Home for Urdu.”

⁹ There are also few studies specifically addressing translation in the other direction, from Persian to Urdu. See Bailey, *History of Urdu Literature*, 80–82; and Kavusi-Nizhad and Islami, “Barrasi-yi Pishinah-yi Tarjumah.”

¹⁰ Riedel, “Kalila wa Demna.”

¹¹ Truschke, *Culture of Encounters*; Ernst, “Muslim Studies of Hinduism”; Sarma and Zamani, “On the Persian Translation of Bhāskara’s *Līlāvati*.”

¹² Green, “Trans-border Traffic”; Katib Hazarah, *Kabul Under Siege*, 11.

¹³ Faiz, *Afghanistan Rising*, 97.

in Iranian nationalism; unlike the Pashtuns of Afghanistan, in Iran the Baluch have been marginalized, sidelined by Persian-speakers.

This article closely examines Persian translations of Urdu-language works about Persian literature as a means of considering the less-studied side of the exchange between Urdu and Persian. In particular, it focuses on translations of an influential Urdu-language work on Persian literary history, *Shi'r al-ʿAjām* (*Poetry of the Persians*), by Shibli Nuʿmani. Bridging the gap between the *tazkirah* tradition and modern methodologies of literary historiography, *Shi'r al-ʿAjām* was an important work for literary modernity in India, Afghanistan, and Iran. The text was translated into Persian on two separate occasions: first by a group of Afghans in the 1920s and then again by an Iranian translator between the 1930s and 1950s. What was the significance of this text for twentieth-century Persian readers? What role did it play in burgeoning projects of producing national literary histories in Iran and Afghanistan? Why were two Persian translations of such a voluminous text produced within such a short span of time? This article's close and comparative reading of the Afghan and Iranian translations of Shibli's *Shi'r al-ʿAjām* offers an entry point into these questions.

Analysis of the translations reveals how twentieth-century Indians, Afghans, and Iranians were all invested in the same literary heritage: the poetry of the premodern Persianate world. Persian had been an important language of learning (among other functions) across much of Eurasia, linking societies together in a Persianate cosmopolis through a shared idiom and texts and common aesthetic, social, and political forms. The term "cosmopolis" need not suggest an idealized zone free of hierarchies, as scholars like Nile Green rightly warn against romanticizing the Persianate past.¹⁴ But the Persianate was cosmopolitan in the sense that Persian learning was not the purview of one religious or ethnic community, but rather the common language of varied groups, allowing for connections across a highly diverse *Kulturkreis* without a single geographic core or center.¹⁵

As the cultural logics underpinning the Persianate shifted in the nineteenth century, modernity and nationalism did not simply bring an end to Persianate affiliations as is often claimed.¹⁶ Instead, such historical ties endured—now strengthened by new physical infrastructure like drivable roads linking India, Afghanistan, and Iran—and even played a crucial role in generating national identities and national heritage.¹⁷ Modernizers reworked the Persianate textual tradition, producing a Persianate modernity which drew on the connections that the earlier cosmopolis had engendered.¹⁸ Yet, simultaneously, this Persianate modernity sought to cover its tracks, erasing the traces of its cosmopolitan connections so as to present an image of national heritage that appeared to be *sui generis*, independent, self-contained.¹⁹ In other words, what I term "Persianate modernity" is the form the Persianate takes after the transformations of the nineteenth century. It is the connected framework left over from the bygone cosmopolis that enables intellectuals from Iran, Afghanistan, and India to learn from each other in their modernizing projects, and to rework the literary texts of the earlier tradition into national heritage.

In the 1920s, Afghan translators produced what can be understood as a "cosmopolitan Persianate" translation: closely in line with the Urdu original, in a context of porous borders between Persian and Urdu, for an audience that defined itself as much in religious terms as

¹⁴ Green, "Frontiers of the Persianate World," 2.

¹⁵ Eaton, "The Persian Cosmopolis."

¹⁶ For examples of such claims, see Arjomand, "From the Editor," 3; and Spooner, "Epilogue," 303. I draw from Fredric Jameson's understanding of a "dominant cultural logic" as "the force field in which very different types of cultural impulses...must make their way" (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 6).

¹⁷ On this infrastructure, see Green, "New Histories"; and Koyagi, "Drivers across the Desert."

¹⁸ As Eric Lewis Beverley suggests, cosmopolitan languages like Persian "provided templates whose elements could be disaggregated and recombined into new systems" (Beverley, "Documenting the World," 1051–52).

¹⁹ Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi describes a similar dynamic in which the contributions of Persianate native informants were erased from European Orientalism's self-narrative, producing what he terms a "genesis amnesia" (Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*, 18–34). He also first coined "Persianate modernity" (*ibid.*, 9, *et passim*).

national ones. The later Iranian translation is instead a “Persianate modern” translation, severing the text from its Indo-Persianate, Muslim context and more freely remaking it for a national, Iranian audience. The Afghan translation is a text within the expansive, fluid boundaries of the *adab* tradition, while the Iranian translation belongs to the discipline of discrete, nationally bounded literature. After analyzing these two translations, this article concludes by surveying some of the other noteworthy translations of Urdu texts into Persian.

Shibli’s Poetry of the Persians between *Adab* and “Literature”

By the end of the nineteenth century, Urdu had become a major vehicle for Islamic modernist thought, not only in South Asia but globally, including both Iran and Afghanistan. The Indian Muslim reformer Abu al-ʿAla Maududi, for example, influenced Islamist political thinkers everywhere from Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt to the Taliban movement in the Afghan-Pakistani borderlands and Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran.²⁰ While the global reach of Urdu and Indo-Muslim political and religious thought has been the subject of ample scholarly attention, the literary impact of Urdu has been neglected. Scholarship on these international connections reflects an artificial division, treating literature as a separate sphere from politics and religion. The latter two are recognized as international, ecumenically influencing and receiving influence from as far afield as South Asia, Lebanon, Egypt, and beyond, whereas literature appears as if it were a hermetically sealed domain within national borders. This division may in part stem from the way the sources describe themselves: while Iran’s Islamic revolutionaries made no secret of their internationalism, hoping to spread the revolution beyond the borders of Iran, its literary scholars were by and large nationalists who saw Iran as having a proprietary claim to Persian literature.²¹ Yet as recent scholarship has demonstrated, the project of modernizing and canonizing Persian literature was also an international one, participating in exchanges across (and beyond) the Persianate sphere, despite any pretensions to the contrary from the nationalist litterateurs.²²

Shibli Nuʿmani (1857–1914) was a key figure in Islamic modernist thought in South Asia, as well as in the project of modernizing the Persianate literary heritage. An Islamic scholar, reformer, and educator from Azamgarh in northern India, his life’s work was to develop Islamic education in India—and ultimately develop an approach to Islam—that could be compatible with colonial modernity, engaging with European historiographic methodologies in order to revitalize the Islamic tradition. Shibli’s *Shiʿr al-ʿAjam* (*Poetry of the Persians*) is a monumental work on Persian poetry, spanning five volumes totaling over 1,500 pages, written in Urdu and published between 1908 and 1918. The first three volumes outline periods of Persian poetry and are structured according to the traditional *tazkirah* format, organized around biographical entries on the major poets of each period and selections of their poetry. The final two volumes, however, move entirely beyond the biographical anthology format and offer literary history and criticism of a kind that cannot be found in the *tazkirah*

²⁰ Green, *Global Islam*, 82; Fuchs, “A Direct Flight to Revolution.” Despite their sectarian differences, Maududi and Khomeini shared a vision of a modern Islamic state. The two had met and discussed political ideas in Mecca in 1963 (Nasr, *The Vanguard*, 154, 253n29), and prior to Khomeini’s return to Iran in 1979, his emissaries visited Maududi in Pakistan (Wink, “The Islamization of Pakistan,” 45; Chaman, *Meri Yadgar Mulaqaten*, 48–53 [cited in Rieck, *The Shias of Pakistan*, 434–35n246]). The extent of Maududi’s influence on Khomeini is debated. Saïd Amir Arjomand contends that “Khomeini’s idea of Islamic government...does not betray any influence of the ideological innovations of Mawdudi,” but nevertheless concedes that Maududi was read widely (in Arabic and Persian translation) by Khomeini’s followers, and significantly influenced the slogans and language of the 1979 Revolution (Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, 97, 104–5).

²¹ Historian Joan Wallach Scott warns against taking the terms used and claims made by historical sources at face value, lest the scholar become “an unwitting party to the politics of another age” (Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 137–38).

²² Hodgkin, “Classical Persian Canons”; Schwartz, *Remapping Persian Literary History*.

genre. Synthesizing Islamic historiographical methods with the techniques of European Orientalist scholarship, Shibli provides an account of Persian poetry guided by a continuous, progressive sense of time. Rather than merely discussing individual poets, each discretely bound within separate biographical entries as in traditional *tazkirahs*, in the fourth and fifth volumes of *Shi'r al-'Ajam* Shibli discusses poetic movements which build on literary and historical developments that precede them.

This text, which drew on a wide range of Persian *tazkirahs* and *divāns* from Iran and South Asia alike, played a vital role in the transition from *tazkirah* (a premodern genre of biographical anthology) to modern literary history,²³ and became a central textbook for the teaching of Persian literature in India. It later also found its way into the Persian literature curriculum in Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. The Iranian literary scholar Sa'īd Nafisi (1895–1966) called it “the first book by a wise and forward-thinking man to analyze [*tajziyah va tahlil*] Persian *adab*,” expressing his surprise that though Shibli wrote his book in “one of the third-rate cities of India” (*az shahr-hā-yi darajah-yi sivvum-i hind*), it “paved the path of inquiry [*taḥqīq*] for those who wanted guidance,” to such an extent that Edward Granville Browne (1862–1926), “one of the famous Orientalists of his time,” relied time and again on Shibli's work.²⁴

Shibli's *Shi'r al-'Ajam* illustrates the difficulty in imposing clear divisions between Urdu and Persian, *tazkirah* and literary history, literary heritage and national community, secular culture and religious knowledge, as *adab* generally elided such neat distinctions. While the term is often translated as “belles lettres,” *adab* is a more expansive concept not limited to the strictly literary; it also encompasses moral behavior, perhaps better understood as something akin to “habitus.” The Iranian litterateur Muhammad-Husayn Furughi “Zuka' al-Mulk” (1839–1907) explained *adab* as

knowing the limits and extent of everything...*adab*...means *dānish* [knowledge]...but in the terminology of the literati [*udabā*] of the age, the science of *adab* [*'ilm-i adab*] is knowledge of poetry and prose, which they call “oratory” [*sukhan-sanji*] in Persian, and whoever possesses this knowledge is an orator, or *adīb* in Arabic. The meaning of *adabiyāt* is those forms of speech [*sukhan*] that teach knowledge and help a person to recognize divine favor and attain the light of clear-sightedness and the luster of awareness.²⁵

Thus knowledge informing proper social behavior (*adab*) is cultivated through the mastery of the literary forms (also *adab*) in which it finds its expression; Mana Kia has usefully defined *adab* as “proper form,” which captures both the aesthetic-literary and social-ethical dimensions of the concept.²⁶ From the nineteenth century on, the meaning of *adab* began to shift from belles lettres and “cultivated knowledge as well as character, conduct, and manners”; the term came to signify “literature” in a modern, narrowly defined sense: secular, finite, one part of a “world republic of letters.”²⁷

²³ Jabbari, “The Making of Modernity.” On the transition from *tazkirah* to literary history, see also Mufti, *Forget English!*, 131–44; and Grewal, “Urdu through Its Others,” 88–130.

²⁴ Fakhr-i Da'ī, *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, 3: *hā-vāv*. In his review of Edward Browne's *A Literary History of Persia*, Muhammad-Taqi Bahar describes Shibli as the first person outside of Iran to write a critical, scholarly history of Iranian literature (*Bahar va Adab*, 1:340–42). For Browne's engagement with Shibli, see Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, 3:108, 261, 265–80, 286–98, 541; 4:163–65, 241–70, 299. In addition to his reception in Iran and Afghanistan, Shibli features in the Tajik educational textbook *Adabiyoti Tojik* (Toirov et al., *Adabiyoti Tojik*, 81).

²⁵ Furughi, *'ilm-i Badi'*, 23. On this text, see Fani, “Iran's Literary Becoming.”

²⁶ Kia, “*Adab* as Ethics of Literary Form,” 282, 288; Kia, *Persianate Selves*, 199–200; on *adab*, see also Metcalf, *Moral Conduct and Authority*; Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 380–81; and Mayeur-Jaouen, “Introduction.”

²⁷ Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature*, 6; Mufti, *Forget English!*, 80; Krämer, “Religion, Culture, and the Secular,” 60–61; Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*; Hallaq, “*Adab* e) Modern Usage.”

Yet to understand premodern *adab* as secular literature, as many now do, is to miss much about its historical function. *Adab* encompassed pious odes in praise of the Prophet as well as satires lampooning the faithful and flouting religious strictures; it cannot be accurately described as either secular or religious. As Thomas Bauer reminds us, the secular/religious binary is of little use for understanding much of the Islamicate world. In Europe, modern “secular” domains like literature or law took on distinct disciplinary identities only after achieving independence from the control of the church—the sphere of religion. But in the Islamicate world, in the absence of any such centralized church, “religion” constituted itself differently within each domain, according to the norms of that field. This is not to suggest that every aspect of Islamicate societies was primarily concerned with religious matters, but rather that religion did not constitute a separate sphere of its own.²⁸ Kia has articulated a definition of the Persianate with Islam and Persian *adab* at its core, refining Shahab Ahmed’s work which also considered Islam as a centrally constitutive element of the Persianate.²⁹ *Adab* was “the public culture of the Persianate ecumene,” as Brian Spooner describes it, and I argue that just as the Persianate endured well into the twentieth century and beyond—much later than conventionally thought—so did *adab*.³⁰ Kia’s formulation, understanding the “Persianate” and the “Islamic” as aporetically linked through *adab*, is most useful for making sense of how an Islamic scholar like Shibli approached Persian poetry, and how he was first received by his Afghan translators.

Shibli understood Persian poetry not as secular literature but as *adab*. Rather than a secular enterprise, *adab* was “part of knowledge (*‘ilm*)” as Astrid Meier aptly put it.³¹ As such, *adab* was within Shibli’s purview as an Islamic scholar (*‘ālim*).³² Moreover, the very notion of world literature—a world system of discretely bounded, mutually interchangeable national literatures—is absent in Shibli’s *Shi‘r al-‘Ajam*. For Shibli, Persian(ate) poetry was not one national literature among others but a world unto itself, a cosmopolis not divided by nation-states but united by Islam; it was the poetry of *‘ajam*, a category inclusive of many peoples.³³ Nor was Persian a completely discrete literature, but rather one with porous boundaries separating it from Arabic and Urdu.³⁴ Shibli’s mission was similarly not a secular one. He considered Persian poetry to play a religious role in Muslim education in the subcontinent: literary *adab* was the basis for moral cultivation. *Shi‘r al-‘Ajam* was written for use in Muslim educational institutions like the Nadwatul Ulama seminary; for Shibli, the era of Persian poetry begins with Islam, and any (Middle) Persian verse that predates Islam does

²⁸ Bauer, *Culture of Ambiguity*, 129–35.

²⁹ Kia, *Persianate Selves*, 9, 13–15; Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 83–85. Though Ahmed rejected the term “Persianate” in favor of a “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” in order to decenter the Persian language, Kia contends that such a complex “depends on the transregional reach of the Persian language.” It was not Turkic, after all, but Persian learning that the Balkans and Bengal had in common. James Pickett similarly offers a lucid definition of the Persianate, characterized by its relationship to a Persian literary canon and to Islam. Pickett, *Polymaths of Islam*, 22–29.

³⁰ Spooner, “Epilogue,” 302–3; Kia and Marashi, “After the Persianate.” For a fascinating engagement with Indo-Muslim *adab* in the early twentieth century, see Mian, “Surviving Desire.”

³¹ This quote comes from Meier’s study of one of Shibli’s intellectual influences, the Hanafi scholar Ibn ‘Abidin. Meier, “*Adab* and Scholarship,” 95.

³² *Adab* was crucial for religious scholars, to the extent that Bauer describes the “*adabization* of the ulama” as early as the Saljuq period. Bauer, “Mamluk Literature,” 108–11.

³³ On Indian conceptions of *‘ajam* including Shibli’s understanding of the term, see Sharma, “Redrawing the Boundaries,” 57–60.

³⁴ Pickett’s description of the relationship between languages in Central Asia offers a fitting model for our understanding of Persian, Arabic, and Urdu. Drawing from Sheldon Pollock’s notion of cosmopolis (Pollock, “Cosmopolitan and Vernacular”; Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 10–30), Pickett describes Persian as simultaneously a vernacular of the Arabic cosmopolis, and a cosmopolis unto itself, of which Turkic is a vernacular, using the metaphor of Russian nesting dolls to explain how each system can both contain and be contained (Pickett, *Polymaths of Islam*, 26–34). We might understand Urdu in similar terms to Pickett’s discussion of Turkic, as a vernacular of the Persian cosmopolis. The vernaculars drew much from the cosmopolis while contributing less to it, but the borders of such a hierarchy were nevertheless occasionally permeated.

not constitute poetry but merely rhymed prose.³⁵ He gave a particularly Islamic framework to his *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, counting Persian literature among the Islamic sciences and defining its territory according to the lands upon which Islam, a “cloud of munificence,” rained.³⁶

While Shibli's project can hardly be described as secular, it was certainly modern,³⁷ and displays cross-pollination between the Islamic mode of reading associated with *adab* and what Edward Said would later describe as a humanistic practice of “secular criticism,” criticism that is “skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings.”³⁸ The fourth and fifth volumes of *Shi'r al-'Ajam* exemplify the humanistic project of historicism as they approach Persian poetry not as timeless but rather as a specifically historical entity. Shibli articulates his understanding of humanistic scholarship clearly in another text, his travelogue to Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. After visiting Cairo's renowned center of Islamic learning, the al-Azhar seminary, Shibli expresses his disappointment with Azharite scholarship: “several of the shaykhs and disciples of Azhar are thought to be accomplished masters in their subjects...but the entire foundation of their accomplishment rests on the memorization of minutiae, in which there is not even a suspicion of critical research [*tahqiq*] and innovative thinking [*ijtihād*].”³⁹ What Shibli wants, then, is “secular criticism,” but squarely within a committed Islamic framework, not a secular one—a model that would upset Said's neat binary between humanistic skepticism and religious dogmatism. Shibli's *Shi'r al-'Ajam* is a critical, historicist approach to an object—Persian poetry—conceived of in Islamic terms. It is therefore in many ways a hybrid, liminal text, complicating neat binaries between religious and secular, traditional and modern genres, *tazkirah* and literary history, *adab* and literature. Accordingly, the translation history of *Shi'r al-'Ajam* straddles these divisions as well.

A Tale of Two Translations

Shi'r al-'Ajam was translated into Persian on two separate occasions: first in Afghanistan, then in Iran. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Afghan state put Persian literature in the service of its modernizing policies and efforts to craft an Afghan national identity.⁴⁰ Under Amanullah Khan (r. 1919–26), new, modern schools were founded with Persian literacy at the heart of the curriculum, and in 1921 the Afghan Ministry of Education was established.⁴¹ Crucially, the ministry drew on an Urdu-language text, *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, for its Persian curriculum. The first translation of *Shi'r al-'Ajam* was commissioned by the Afghan Ministry of Education and published in Kabul and Lahore between 1925 and 1927 by a series of Afghan translators including Mansur Ansari and Burhan al-Din Khan Kushkaki (clerics trained in Islamic law), Fayz Muhammad Khan (Afghanistan's foreign minister), Shir Muhammad Khan, Sardar Gul, and Sarvar Guya I'timadi (adviser to the Ministry of Education). For the sake of brevity, this team-translation is henceforth referred to as “the Afghan translation.” These translators would all go on to become members of the literary society Anjuman-i Adabi-yi Kabul (Literary Association of Kabul), inaugurated by Muhammad Nadir Shah (r. 1929–33) in 1931.⁴² As part of its nation-building efforts, the state established additional

³⁵ Shibli, *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, 4:114.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:1, 2:1.

³⁷ For an analysis of Shibli's thought in terms of Islamic modernism, see Murad, *Intellectual Modernism of Shibli Nu'māni*. For his modernizing innovations in *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, such as his distinctly modern sensibilities around homoerotic poetry, see Jabbari, “The Making of Modernity.”

³⁸ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 26. Michael Allan similarly contrasted the mode of reading embedded in premodern *adab*, “a practice of reading based on memorization, embodiment, and recitation in Qur'anic schools,” with literary reading, a “practice based on reflection, critique, and judgment” (Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature*, 3).

³⁹ Shibli, *Turkey, Egypt, and Syria*, 183; Shibli, *Safarnamah*, 185.

⁴⁰ Green, “Afghan Literature between Diaspora and Nation,” 13–16.

⁴¹ On the modernizing educational reforms of this period, see Baiza, *Education in Afghanistan*, 67–93.

⁴² On the Literary Association of Kabul, see Ahmadi, “Kabul Literary Society”; and Fani, “Becoming Literature,” 82–86.

literary and cultural institutions in the 1930s and 1940s like the Literary Association of Herat, the Faculty of Letters at Kabul University, and journals like *Kabul* and *Aryana*. The translation of *Shiʿr al-ʿAjām* later served as both an important source of information and a historiographic model for Afghan scholars developing a modern approach to Persian literature.⁴³ Yet the translation, carried out in the 1920s, precedes much of the nation-building to come later in the century, and the translation practices in many ways reflect an older, cosmopolitan Persianate approach to language and literary heritage. In this *adabī* approach, the relationship between Persian and Urdu is capacious, with relatively fluid boundaries separating them, and the role of the translator(s) is obscured. These practices differ from the nationalist projects that would be undertaken later in the century.⁴⁴

The volumes of the Afghan translation lack any preface or introduction to situate the text, simply presenting *Shiʿr al-ʿAjām* as it is, without explanation. The translation itself is extremely faithful, cleaving closely to the original, even reproducing its mistakes. For example, Shibli gives the wrong year of death for Yaʿqub-i Lays, and this error is repeated in the Afghan translation. Another example of this noteworthy faithfulness is where Shibli occasionally uses an English word in Urdu, such as *karikṭar* “character.” In the original Urdu text, the English word is written according to Urdu orthography, using the letter ٺ (the retroflex [ṭ]) as is common in Urdu for representing the English consonant “t” (Fig. 1).⁴⁵

In the Afghan translation, even the Urdu spelling of an English word is precisely reproduced, despite the letter used being absent from conventional Persian orthography (Fig. 2).⁴⁶

This suggests fluid boundaries between Urdu and Persian. Elements such as Urdu-specific letters or English loanwords nativized in Urdu can appear in the Persian text. The only place where the Afghan translators’ voice can be heard is in the occasional footnote: sequestered away from the text by a line and usually signed with an individual translator’s name.⁴⁷

The manner in which the Afghan translators dealt with Shibli’s citations of Urdu verse further illustrates the fluid boundaries between the two languages. Shibli frequently quotes from Urdu poets like Mir Anis (1803–74), Mir Taqi Mir (1725–1810), Mir Zamir (1775–1855), and Mirza Dabir (1803–75) in order to demonstrate points about poetics. For example, Shibli quotes from Mir Anis in his discussion of poetic intemperance (*bē-iʿtidālī*). The Afghan translation maintains the quotation (accurately reproducing the Urdu spelling, including unique Urdu characters such as the undotted nasal *nūn* and the retroflex *rā*) and following discussion exactly. The translators added Persian interlinear translation in a smaller hand between the lines of Urdu poetry.⁴⁸ In another case, an Urdu couplet by Mirza Dabir is quoted in the original, followed by Persian explanation rather than interlinear translation.⁴⁹ The relationship between Persian and Urdu in Shibli’s text—maintained in the Afghan translation—exemplifies what Nile Green termed “Persian plus,” with Persian as a central but not sole language of the Persianate.⁵⁰ The presumed Afghan reader is still part of a Persianate

⁴³ Fani, “Disciplining Persian Literature.”

⁴⁴ Senzil Nawid demonstrates how Afghan historiography took on a distinctly national character beginning under the rule of Muhammad Nadir Shah in the 1930s. See Nawid, “Writing National History.”

⁴⁵ In fact, this Urdu spelling convention had only recently become more or less standardized, replacing the earlier convention of writing the retroflex with four dots as ٺ. Ambiguity persisted in Urdu orthography well into the twentieth century. While Pashto also features retroflex consonants, it does not represent them using this convention; it differentiates them from their non-retroflex equivalents with a unique “ring” (*paṇḍak*) character, as in ٺ [ṭ].

⁴⁶ This is not necessarily always true of Persian texts from South Asia, however. For example, Ghiyas al-Din Rampuri’s *Ghiyas al-Lughat* dictionary, written in Persian and published in Lucknow ca. 1847, includes a map where local placenames like *dhākah* “Dhaka” and *paṭnah* “Patna” are written with the same Urdu-style retroflex characters. I thank Sameer ud Dowla Khan for noticing this and Vaibhav Kaul for sharing the reference.

⁴⁷ For example, see Afghan translation, 1:15, where two footnotes are signed with “*Ansari*,” or 5:32 where the footnote is signed “*mutarjim Ansari*,” in order to distinguish these notes from Shibli’s own footnotes.

⁴⁸ Afghan translation, 4:74–75; cf. Shibli, *Shiʿr al-ʿAjām*, 4:55.

⁴⁹ Afghan translation 4:76; cf. Shibli, *Shiʿr al-ʿAjām*, 4:56.

⁵⁰ Green, “Frontiers of the Persianate World,” 8. Shahab Ahmed argues similarly for a “Balkans-to-Bengal complex” in which Persian is only one important language alongside others. Ahmed, *What Is Islam?*, 83–84.

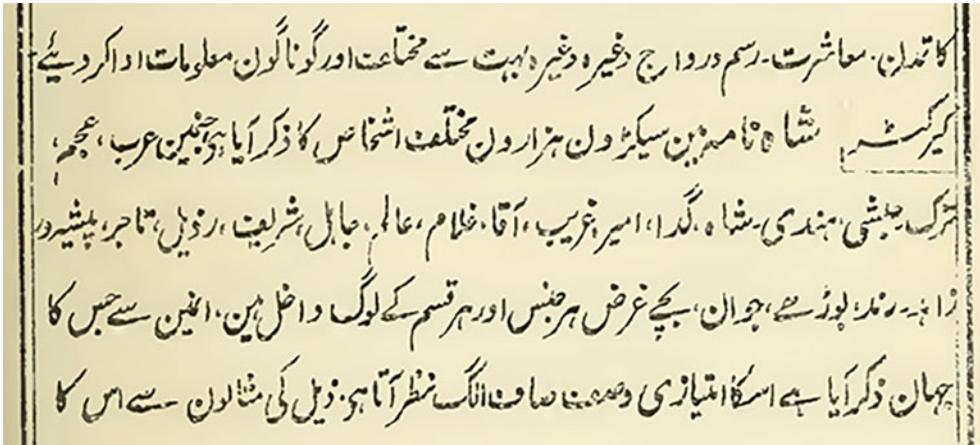


Figure 1. [The English loanword “character” (*karikṭar*) as spelled in the Urdu text.]

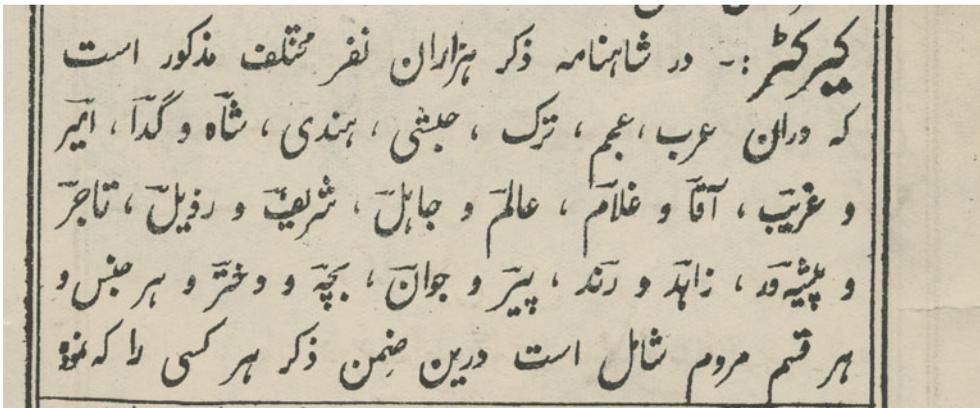


Figure 2. [The Afghan translation reproduces *karikṭar* using the original Urdu orthography.]

cosmopolis; they may prefer to read in Persian but nevertheless have some familiarity with Urdu as well.

Slightly more is known about the circumstances of the second translation of *Shiʿr al-ʿAjam* into Persian, and its translator, the Iranian Sayyid Muhammad-Taqi Daʿi al-Islam “Fakhr-i Daʿi” Gilani (b. 1260 HS/1881–82 CE in Tamijan, Gilan, d. 1343 HS/1964 CE in Tehran). Fakhr-i Daʿi was a political reformist and constitutionalist, as well as a Shiʿi *mujtahid* (religious jurist), having studied with Akhund Muhammad-Kazim Khurasani (1839–1911) and Ayatollah Shaykh ʿAbdullah Mazandarani (1840–1912) in Najaf. Unusually for religious scholars at the time, Khurasani and Mazandarani supported institutions which taught Persian literature, patronizing not only Islamic seminaries but also Iranian societies like the Anjuman-i Ukhuvvat-i Iraniyan (Society of Iranian Brotherhood) in Najaf.⁵¹ In 1910, Fakhr-i Daʿi was dispatched by his teachers from Iraq to India for research and missionary work.⁵² He depicted Bombay as one of India’s prettiest and most populous cities, a “garden” (*bāgh*) of different religions and sects. Among these sects are what he calls the “Aryans” (*āriyā*, probably

⁵¹ Farzaneh, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 126–27; Hermann, “Akhund Khurasani”; Yaghmaʿi, “Iraq xii. Persian Schools in Iraq.”

⁵² Fakhr-i Daʿi, *Shiʿr al-ʿAjam*, 1: alif.

referring to the Arya Samaj, a Hindu proselytizing movement), which he compares to Protestant Christians and describes as anti-Muslim fanatics.⁵³ Notably, given the city's diverse sectarian milieu, Fakhr-i Da'ī does not describe his mission as promoting Shi'ism, but merely a defense of an undifferentiated "Islam" against its detractors. He complained that Iranians in Bombay, despite their great numbers and wealth, did nothing to defend Islam against the onslaught of missionaries and Islamophobes—other than his similarly named friend Sayyid Muhammad-ʿAli Da'ī al-Islam Larijani (1878–1951). Larijani promoted Islam along with Persian language and literature, and founded the newspaper and *anjuman* (association) *Da'vat al-Islam* (*The Call of Islam*). Larijani later went to the Deccan to teach Persian at the Nizam College in Hyderabad, and for this reason Fakhr-i Da'ī had been sent to take Larijani's place in Bombay.⁵⁴

In India, Fakhr-i Da'ī writes, he "faced a new world...in which [he] felt [he] could not continue living according to the old ways [*uslūb-i kuhan*]." He therefore threw himself into the study of two languages which served as vehicles for modernity in the subcontinent: English and Urdu. Fakhr-i Da'ī's arrival in Bombay coincided with Shibli's visit to the city.⁵⁵ By chance, the two found lodging in adjacent, connecting rooms. Fakhr-i Da'ī was impressed with Shibli's stature, dress, and knowledge, and given their shared mission to modernize and protect Islam and Islamicate heritage it is no surprise that the two men became fast friends. They met often and spent a great deal of time in close conversation together.

Later, Fakhr-i Da'ī tired of Bombay's polluted air and the difficulty of life in the city. He moved to Indore, some 600 kilometers away in central India, where he taught Persian language and literature at Indore College. Ultimately, Fakhr-i Da'ī grew exasperated with his working conditions there as well. He was obliged to teach in English, an onerous task which required preparing his lectures in advance; Fakhr-i Da'ī claims that between research, teaching, and preparing the next day's lectures, he worked twenty hours a day. Despite his proficiency in reading—he eventually translated several books from English into Persian—his spoken skills in English were evidently poorer. After eight years in India, Fakhr-i Da'ī returned to Iran, and in Tehran he set about translating several of Shibli's works into Persian. He published the first volume of his translation of Shibli's *Shi'r al-ʿAjam* in 1935.

Why did Fakhr-i Da'ī choose to re-translate this massive work, spanning 1,500 pages, when it had already been translated into Persian just a decade earlier in Afghanistan? Sa'īd Nafisi offers three explanations in his 1955 introduction to Fakhr-i Da'ī's translation. Two are straightforwardly material: he mentions that copies of the book itself were not readily available, and also describes the uneven printing (*chāp-i nāhamvār*) of the Afghan translation as unappealing.⁵⁶ The scarcity of the Afghan translation in Iran certainly could have been a factor. Ronit Ricci observed in a different context that "the motives for translation and those for composing or for copying an existing text" were often identical: both were methods of keeping a text in circulation.⁵⁷ By "uneven printing" Nafisi may have been referring to the first edition of the Afghan translation, which was lithographed, but the original manuscript from which the lithograph was created had been penned in a clear and well-spaced hand, not at all difficult to read.⁵⁸ By the time Fakhr-i Da'ī published his new

⁵³ The Arya Samaj was founded in Bombay in 1875. See Jones, *Socio-religious Reform Movements*, 192–99. On competition between missionary societies and religious groups in fin de siècle Bombay, see Green, *Bombay Islam*, 24–48.

⁵⁴ On Larijani, see Ayvazi, "Mahnamah[-yī] al-Islam"; Marashi, "Print Culture and Its Publics," 99.

⁵⁵ Shibli, *Savānih-i Mawlavi Rumi*, vāv. Fakhr-i Da'ī may have remembered this detail incorrectly; according to Gregory Maxwell Bruce, Shibli was unlikely to have been in Bombay in 1910, but did visit the city in the summer of 1911. I thank Bruce for these details.

⁵⁶ Fakhr-i Da'ī, *Shi'r al-ʿAjam*, 3: *hā-dāl*.

⁵⁷ Ricci, *Islam Translated*, 42. The different context Ricci analyzes (the Malay Archipelago between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries) should be considered, but her argument seems broadly applicable beyond that context.

⁵⁸ There is nevertheless some merit to the idea of differences between the Afghan lithograph and the later Iranian translation. The lithograph followed Afghan orthographic conventions (shared with Urdu and Indo-Persian), such as a consistent distinction between the *yā*²-i *muḥaqqāqah* [ی] and the *yā*²-i *mardūdah* [ے]. The

translation, the Afghan translation had begun to be serialized in print (with movable type) in the journal *Kabul*.⁵⁹

Nafisi's more telling justification for this new translation was his claim that Iranians did not find the Afghan translation suitable (*sāzgār*) because it was not in the kind of Persian language with which they were familiar. This declaration—that the Persian used in the Afghan translation was too different—is even more difficult to defend. The written standard of Persian has been highly conservative in both Iran and Afghanistan, and in the first half of the twentieth century there was little divergence in the literary language written in the two countries. For the most part, the language used in the two translations was remarkably similar, and where they did differ, the choice of vocabulary in the Afghan translation would have been familiar enough for an Iranian reader.

A rare example of lexical divergence between the two translations can be seen in the way English vocabulary was rendered, like the word “character” discussed above. As we have seen, the Afghans preserved the English loan, even retaining in Persian the Urdu orthography with which the English word had been spelled. The Iranian translation renders this word into Persian as *şifāt-i mukhtaşşah* (“particular qualities”). But differences in translating the occasional English word aside, the language used in the two translations was otherwise very close. For example, consider this line from the Urdu original and its two Persian translations:

irān kī khāk funūn-i laţifah kī qābiliyyat men b^hi sab se mumtāz t^hi, aur bi-l-khuşūş shā^cirī uskā khamīr t^hā (Urdu)

The land of Iran was also the most distinguished in its suitability for the fine arts, and especially [*bi-l-khuşūş*] poetry was its nature [lit. “leaven,” *khamīr*].

khāk-i irān qābiliyyat-i funūn-i laţifah az hamah fāyiqtar dāsht, ‘alā-l-khuşūş shā^cirī rawshan būdah (Persian, Afghan translation)

The land of Iran had a suitability for the fine arts superior to all, especially [*‘alā-l-khuşūş*] poetry had been clear.

khāk-i irān hamīshah dar tarbiyyat-i hunar va şanāyi^c-i zarīfah mumtāz az hamah khuşūşan shā^cirī kih gharīzah-yi vay būd (Persian, Iranian translation)

The land of Iran was always distinguished from all in training [the] art[s], especially [*khuşūşan*] poetry which was its nature [*gharīzah*].

In closely comparing the translations, the most obvious differences are seemingly arbitrary choices, like the different words used for “especially,” both of which differ from the original.⁶⁰ Although the Afghan and Iranian translations are worded slightly differently, they display the same noteworthy linguistic features, such as using the Arabic feminine adjective (*tā’ marbūţah*) to agree with broken plurals (*funūn-i laţifah*; *şanāyi^c-i zarīfah*) or the use of the word *shā^cirī* (poetry), as deployed in the original Urdu, rather than the more common *shī^r*. Rather than linguistic discrepancies in translation, as we might have expected to find, what can be generally observed instead in the two translations are divergences in framing and in the text’s relationship to the original Urdu, the products of two different contexts: 1920s Afghanistan, still part of a Persianate cosmopolis, and 1940s Iran, at the height of state-led nationalism and Persianate modernity.

former, also called the *choḡī ye* in Urdu, denotes the *ma^rrūf* vowel [i] whereas the latter, known as *baḡī ye* in Urdu, denotes the *majhūl* vowel [ē]. In western Persian dialects, these vowels merged together as [i] between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries (Perry, “Origin and Development,” 67), whereas in the east (including Afghanistan and India) the two sounds remain separate even today.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Sarvar Guya’s translation in *Kabul* 4, no. 9 (Isfand 1313/February–March 1935).

⁶⁰ This word in particular cannot represent differences in Afghan and Iranian Persian, as the Iranian translator Fakhr-i Da^ci himself uses *‘alā-l-khuşūş* elsewhere (Shibli, *Savānih-i Mawlavī Rūmī*, zā).

The Afghans' approach to translation was grounded in traditional Persianate sensibilities. The association of language and literature with nation and territory, still only incipient in the 1920s, had to compete with an earlier, cosmopolitan Persianate framework in which the boundaries between languages could occasionally be traversed or even muddled, as in the Afghan translation's retention of nativized English loans in Urdu, or its treatment of Shibli's quotations from Urdu poetry. More importantly, in the Persianate framework *adab* was not considered to be the property of any one people. The author Shibli's position as an Indian writing about Persian poetry was hardly unusual in such a framework and required no explanation; thus, the Afghan translators could efface themselves almost entirely from their translation, rendering their presence in the text nearly invisible. Islam was a crucial element in the burgeoning Afghan identity of the early twentieth century, and so Shibli's conceptualization of Persian literature within bounds defined by Islam rather than nation made sense.⁶¹ He began the book with a traditional Sunni prayer: "prayers and blessings be upon the Prophet Muhammad and all his family and Companions," which is dutifully reproduced in the Afghan translation.

While the Afghans in the 1920s approached Persian poetry in terms of *adab*, for the Iranian translator Fakhr-i Da'i in the mid-twentieth century Persian poetry was national literature (*adabiyyāt*), and he was uniquely positioned to translate it.⁶² As a Shi'i missionary and *mujtahid*, a religious jurist with the authority to issue legal opinions, Fakhr-i Da'i omitted the text's initial Sunni prayer. Endowed with a *mujtahid*'s confidence to respond and produce and the authority of an Iranian who believed he was engaging with his own national literature, Fakhr-i Da'i considered his translation something of a revised edition. He was unsatisfied with problems in his copy of the Urdu original (the lithographed edition had many copyist's errors), and set out to correct the text, a considerable task which involved consulting *dīvāns* and *tazkirahs* in several libraries.⁶³ Fakhr-i Da'i approached the text authoritatively, going beyond recension to confidently excise, add, and even change the original where he saw fit. For example, as mentioned above, Shibli gave the wrong date of death for Ya'qub-i Lays and the Afghan translators reproduced it; Fakhr-i Da'i silently changed the date to the correct one, not in a footnote, but in the text itself. He did not limit himself to correcting minor factual details like this one. Consider the following passage and its translations, on the Samanid court and the poet Rudaki (860–940). The original Urdu texts reads:

is vaqt tak jo kuc^h hu'ā vuh shā'iri kī abjad t^hi laikin khāndān-i sāmāniyyah ne daf'atan is zamīn ko āsmān banā diyā, rudaki jo fārsi shā'iri kā abu-l-ābā' samj^hā jātā hai usī darbār kā dast parvar t^hā heretofore whatever had happened was only the elementary stage of poetry, but the Samanid court suddenly turned this ground into sky [e.g. elevated it to great heights]. Rudaki, who is considered the Father of all Fathers of Persian poetry, was brought up in their court.⁶⁴

The Afghan translation is highly literal:

az īn pīsh chīzīkīh guftah shudah abjad-i shā'iri būd laikin khāndān-i sāmāniyyah daf'atan īn zamīn rā āsmān sākht, rūdaki kih ādam-i shā'iri-yi fārsi ast dast parvardah-[y]i hamīn khāndān ast heretofore that which had been composed was only the elementary stage of poetry, but the Samanid court suddenly turned this ground into sky. Rudaki, who is the Adam of Persian poetry, was brought up by this very court.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Tarzi, "Islam, Shari'a, and State Building," 142–43. For the way later Afghan litterateurs laid claim to the Persian literary heritage, contesting Iranian nationalist claims to the same, see Ahmadi, "Exclusionary Poetics." Ultimately, *Shi'r al-'Ajam* would be used in service of a shared discourse of literary nationalism in both Afghanistan and Iran.

⁶² On this transformation from *adab* into *adabiyyāt*, and the differences between them, see Fani, "Becoming Literature," 13–44.

⁶³ Fakhr-i Da'i, *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, 1: kāf.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁵ Afghan translation, 1:33.

Fakhr-i Da'ī's translation takes significant liberties with the text: *khāndān-i sāmānī avval khāndānī ast kih dar tarvīj-i zabān-i fārsī qadam-hā-yi vasi'ī bar dāshtah va adabīyyāt-i irān rā kih tā ānvaqt ghayr az nām chīz-i dīgarī nabūd dar andak zamānī bast va taw-sa'ah dādah ba-awj-i kamāl rasānīd. rūdakī kih vayrā pidar-i shī'r mīdānand dast parvardah-yi darbār-i sāmānī būdah ast.*

The Samanid court was the first court to take extensive steps toward the propagation of the Persian language. In a short time they expanded the literature of Iran, which until that time was not more than a name, and brought it to its peak. Rudaki, who is considered the Father of Poetry, was brought up in the Samanid court.⁶⁶

Fakhr-i Da'ī has changed the text to fit his own view of the Samanids and of Rudaki's greatness. It is noteworthy as well that he elevates Rudaki from the father of Persian poetry, as Shibli described him, to the father of poetry in general.

Furthermore, Fakhr-i Da'ī dispenses with Shibli's quotations of Urdu verse, which the Afghan translators had carefully reproduced and translated. He excises these passages entirely, without exception; sometimes this requires omitting as much as half a page. Fakhr-i Da'ī does not indicate that anything has been abridged nor otherwise offer an explanation.⁶⁷ The only reference to an Urdu poet that survives in his translation is when Shibli describes the Safavid poet Vali Dasht-i Bayazi as the Persian equivalent to Urdu's Mir Taqī Mir.⁶⁸ In another instance, Shibli depicts the New Persian language as emerging out of Persian's encounter with Arabic: "Gradually, as Persian and Arabic mixed, like Urdu a new language was born." While the Afghan translators rendered this accurately into Persian, Fakhr-i Da'ī omitted the words "like Urdu" in his translation.⁶⁹ Undoubtedly, this choice to remove Shibli's engagement with Urdu is partly informed by the Iranian audience for this translation, who, unlike the Afghans, cannot be expected to be familiar with the language. More significantly, in Fakhr-i Da'ī's translation, Urdu does not belong to the same Persianate cosmopolis as Persian does, sharing the same literary heritage of Persian *adab*; instead, Urdu has been left outside the national boundaries of Iranian literary history.

Fakhr-i Da'ī's authoritative approach can also be seen in his introductions. Unlike the Afghans, who present the text without introduction, Fakhr-i Da'ī offers one or two introductions for each of the text's five volumes, helping familiarize Iranian readers with Shibli. In his introduction written after the second printing of his translation, Fakhr-i Da'ī says "the greatest reward for an artist [*hunarmand*] is the pleasure that they take in their own success...now...your humble servant [*in tuhīdast*] is most pleased and satisfied."⁷⁰ Despite referring to himself humbly, Fakhr-i Da'ī has indirectly depicted himself not as a translator, but an artist. Describing how he has carefully studied the text of the original and revised and corrected it, he goes on to imply that the author himself, Shibli, saw the translation as an improvement on the mistakes and shortcomings present in the original. Fakhr-i Da'ī explicitly dedicates "this book" to his compatriots. For Fakhr-i Da'ī to be dedicating the book—and not just his translation—implies a sense of ownership, that it is his to dedicate in the first place. Considering the powerful Iranian state's investment in claiming Persian *adab* as national heritage, at a time when nationalism and the nation-state model had achieved

⁶⁶ Fakhr-i Da'ī, *Shī'r al-'Ajam*, 1:21.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Fakhr-i Da'ī, *Shī'r al-'Ajam*, 4:39–40, 52, 67, 69, 196.

⁶⁸ Shibli, *Shī'r al-'Ajam*, 5:67; Fakhr-i Da'ī, *Shī'r al-'Ajam*, 5:65. Mir Taqī Mir was one of the most esteemed Urdu poets, renowned for his *ghazals* and *marṣiyahs*.

⁶⁹ Shibli, *Shī'r al-'Ajam*, 1:16, emphasis added ("raftah raftah fārsī 'arabī makhliūt ho kar urdū kī tarḥ ek jadīd zabān paidā ho ga'ī, aur vuh gūyā khāṣṣ islāmī zabān t'īr"); cf. Afghan translation, 1:27 ("fārsī ba-'arabī makhliūt gashtah miṣl-i zabān-i urdū yak lisān-i naw ba-vujūd āmad va īn fārsī gūyā zabān-i islāmī būdah") and Fakhr-i Da'ī, *Shī'r al-'Ajam*, 1:18 ("fārsī raftah raftah makhliūt ba-'arabī shudah va gū'ī hamān, zabān-i khāṣṣ-i islāmī gardīd").

⁷⁰ Fakhr-i Da'ī, *Shī'r al-'Ajam*, 1: bā.

hegemony, his confidence is understandable.⁷¹ Fakhr-i Da'ī's translation exemplifies Persianate modernity. It draws on cosmopolitan connections, translating from Urdu and relying on an Indian scholar to analyze Persian poetry, but effaces those connections in translation in order to present Persian literature as the national heritage of Iran.

Additional Translations

The twentieth century witnessed the translation of numerous other texts from Urdu into Persian in Iran. Some were related to Shibli: Hafiz Mahmud Khan Shirani's (1880–1946) Urdu-language *Tanqid-i Shi'r al-ʿAjam-i Shibli Nuʿmani* (*Critique of Shibli Nuʿmani's "Poetry of the Persians"*) was translated into Persian.⁷² Shibli's protégé Sayyid Sulayman Nadvi (1884–1953) wrote an Urdu-language travelogue on his travels in Afghanistan, *Sayr-i Afghanistan* (1944), which was later translated into Persian by Nazir Ahmad Salami.⁷³ Fakhr-i Da'ī in particular was a prolific translator from Urdu (and English). His other translations from Urdu include Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *Tafsir al-Qurʿan* (*Exegesis of the Qurʿan*, 1880–1904), and several of Shibli's works. While in Indore, Fakhr-i Da'ī had read Shibli's *Tarikh-i ʿIlm-i Kalam* (*History of Speculative Theology*) and proclaimed it a "masterpiece"; he published his translation of the first volume of the work in Tehran in 1328 HS/1949–50 CE with the publisher Rangin. Ibn Sina Press published the second volume the following year. It was well received in Iran, as evidenced by the numerous times it has been referenced and cited in Iranian works on *fiqh*.⁷⁴ Fakhr-i Da'ī also translated Shibli's *Kutubkhanah-yi Iskandariyyah* (*The Library of Alexandria*, 1892) as well as *Savanih-i Mawlana Rum* (*Biography of Mawlana Rumi*, 1892; published in Persian translation in 1953). His translations from English included the works of Indian Muslims, such as Syed Ameer Ali's *A Short History of the Saracens* (1899, translated as *Tarikh-i ʿArab va Islam [History of the Arabs and Islam]*), and works about India, like Claude Fraser de la Fosse's *History of India* (1905).⁷⁵ These translations help demonstrate that Iranian readers had an appetite for learning about South Asia, and in particular reading about Indian Muslims, not only Parsis.

Fakhr-i Da'ī also translated the French scholar Gustave Le Bon's *La Civilisation des Arabes* (1884) into Persian by way of Sayyid ʿAli Bilgrami's Urdu translation (*Tamaddun-i ʿArab*, 1896). In his preface, Fakhr-i Da'ī remarked on the difficulty of separating the author's own notes (*hāshiyah*) from those of the Urdu translator, leading him to end up translating both. This translation serves as another example of the dynamics of Persianate modernity: this Urdu translation offered Iranians a useful model for making sense of the premodern past according to modern methodologies. Fakhr-i Da'ī related how he became acquainted with European Orientalist scholarship during his time in India, and admired their novel historiographical methods. He saw this book as an important text to translate for its treatment of Islamic and literary (*adabi*) topics "in accordance with today's scientific principles and foundations," and described his relay translation as a "service to Iranian society" (*khidmatī bah*

⁷¹ Elsewhere, Fakhr-i Da'ī writes of his great joy at participating in the "sacred and auspicious movement" translating works into "our national language" led by "the glorious leader of the country, His Imperial Majesty [Riza Shah] Pahlavi." Le Bon, *Tamaddun-i Islam va ʿArab*, ch. His massive translation of Sir Percy Sykes's *History of Persia* was another act of patriotic devotion to Iran. Fakhr-i Da'ī explains that the value of this book is in its praise of the "land of Iran" and the "Iranian spirit of genius," arguing that it reveals how "the Iranian spirit of genius has shown its superiority in all issues" (Sykes, *Tarikh-i Iran*, 2: *hijdah*).

⁷² *Naqd-i Shi'r al-ʿAjam-i Shibli Nuʿmani*, translated by Shahid Chaudhari and Taufiq Subhani. Tehran: Danishgah-i Payam-i Nur, 1380 HS/2001–2 CE.

⁷³ *Sayr-i Afghanistan: Sih Hamsafar*, translated by Nazir Ahmad Salami (Zahidan: Tawhid, 2003). Salami is a prominent Iranian Sunni cleric who represents Sistan and Baluchistan province in Iran's Assembly of Experts. He is also a translator, and follower, of Maududi.

⁷⁴ For example, ʿAbbasi Furdaw'i, *Tarikh-i ʿIlm-i Kalam ta Qarn-i Chaharum*.

⁷⁵ For an argument considering English as Persianate, see Jabbari, "Sa'di's Gulistan in British India"; for a different argument about the relationship between English and the Persianate, see Beverley, "Documenting the World."

jāmi'ah-yi īrāni).⁷⁶ With translations like this one, Urdu became a conduit for European texts and ideas in Persian. While scholarship has long recognized Arabic, Azerbaijani, and Ottoman Turkish as important intermediaries for European thought in Persian, Urdu's similar role has never been acknowledged.⁷⁷

Given Afghanistan's deeper entanglements with South Asia, Afghans were also eager readers of Urdu in translation. Urdu literature, like the poetry of Muhammad Iqbal, was translated by Afghan translators like 'Abd al-Hadi Davi.⁷⁸ Members of the group that had first translated Shibli's *Shi'r al-'Ajam* in Afghanistan also translated *al-Faruq* (1898), Shibli's biography of the caliph 'Umar, and *Tuhfat al-Aman fi Sirat al-Nu'man* (*The Gift of Peace, on the Biography of al-Nu'man*, Kabul, 1303 HS/1924–25 CE, translated by Burhan al-Din Kushkaki), his biography of Abu Hanifa (originally *Sirat al-Nu'man*).⁷⁹ Works similar to Shibli's *Shi'r al-'Ajam* were also translated from Urdu by Afghan translators like Qari 'Abdullah Khan.

Qari 'Abdullah Khan (1871–1944) was the Afghan poet-laureate (*malik al-shu'arā*) and tutor to Amir Habibullah Khan and Crown Prince 'Inayatullah Khan Siraj. He also taught at the elite Habibiyyah high school in Kabul, Afghanistan's first modern educational institution, modeled after India's Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (later reincorporated as Aligarh Muslim University, where Shibli had taught for nearly two decades). As such, Habibiyyah followed the Anglo-Indian curriculum and offered Urdu as an option for the second language requirement.⁸⁰ Qari 'Abdullah worked with many Indian Muslims, who at one point made up half of the faculty of Habibiyyah, including the principal of the school, 'Abd al-Ghani Khan of Lahore.⁸¹ In addition to his position as educator, Qari 'Abdullah led the Literary Association of Kabul, other members of which had produced the "Afghan translation" of *Shi'r al-'Ajam* discussed above. He was also closely familiar with Shibli's work, having relied on it as one of the sources for the second-grade Persian literature textbook he compiled for the Ministry of Education.⁸²

Qari 'Abdullah translated Muhammad Husayn Azad's *Sukhandan-i Fars* ([On the] *Poets of Persia*, 1907) from Urdu into Persian. Azad was an Indian Muslim scholar of Persian and Urdu, and his work may have influenced Shibli's prose style. *Sukhandan-i Fars* comprised Azad's lectures on Persian literature and philology. The translation first appeared as a series of articles in the journal *Kabul*, and was later published in book form in 1315 HS/1936–37 CE.⁸³ The book is preceded by a brief introduction from "The Association" (*anjuman*), most likely the Literary Association of Kabul. This introduction describes *Sukhandan-i Fars* as a book on the linguistics (*fiqh al-lughah*) and phonology (*fiqh al-ṣawt*) of Persian literature, the first of its kind in the world of Persian letters.⁸⁴

Later in the twentieth century, as the project of developing a centralized Afghan state progressed, national literature came to replace the cosmopolitan Persianate *adab* in Afghanistan as well. The 1930s were a radical turning point for Afghan nationalist historiography, as reflected in Qari 'Abdullah's translation practices.⁸⁵ His translation of *Sukhandan-i*

⁷⁶ Le Bon, *Tamaddun-i Islam va 'Arab*, 2–3. On relay translation, see St. André, "Relay"; for discussion of a Persian case study of relay translation, see Rouhi, "Darbarah-yi Tarjumah-yi Dun Kishut."

⁷⁷ On Persian translations from European languages, and the role of Arabic, Azerbaijani, and Ottoman Turkish as intermediaries, see Meisami, "Iran"; Salihi, "Tarjumah az Zaban-i Turki-yi 'Usmani"; and Chelkowski, "Edward G. Browne's Turkish Connexion," 28.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Davi, *Asar-i Urdu-yi Iqbal*.

⁷⁹ For a contemporary review of Shibli's *al-Faruq* in an Afghan journal, see Anjuman-i Adabi-yi Kabul, "Taqriz va Intiqad-i al-Faruq."

⁸⁰ Adamec, "Ḥabibiya School."

⁸¹ On Afghan connections with the "Urdu sphere," see Green, "Trans-border Traffic."

⁸² Fani, "Becoming Literature," 35–36.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 35n95.

⁸⁴ Unlike *fiqh al-lughah*, the term *fiqh al-ṣawt* did not gain much traction in Persian; it was used sparingly, but no nineteenth- or twentieth-century Persian dictionary records it. Today Persian and Pashto both prefer indigenous neologisms for "phonology": *āvā-shināsī* and *vāj-shināsī* in Persian and the equivalent *ghaḡ-pohana* in Pashto.

⁸⁵ Green, "From Persianate Pasts."

Fars is much freer than either the Afghan or Iranian translations of *Shi'r al-'Ajam*. He took great liberties in reworking Azad's colloquial lectures into more laconic prose and excising details he must have found unnecessary. For example, Azad describes the difficulty of translating English philological works into Urdu, noting that English scholars master English, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and other tongues and base their work upon these languages.⁸⁶ Qari 'Abdullah leaves Hebrew out, perhaps deeming the first three languages sufficient to make the point.⁸⁷ As a result of this concision, his Persian translation runs nearly a hundred pages shorter than the original Urdu. In contrast to the earlier Afghan translators of *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, who retained Shibli's English words in their translation, Qari 'Abdullah rendered Azad's *likchar* (lectures) as *khaṭābah*, and similarly translated other English words into Persian. As such, Qari 'Abdullah's translation—published during a decade of Afghan state-driven nation-building—demonstrates a move away from the liminal moment when *Shi'r al-'Ajam* was first translated, toward a more confident sense of literary authority backed by the state.

Conclusion

These instances of Urdu-to-Persian translation offer insight into the dynamics associated with literary and cultural exchange in the first half of the twentieth century. Translating works on Persian literature from Urdu into Persian was not only an opportunity for translators to add to the knowledge available about the literary tradition; it could also be an opportunity for the translators to demonstrate their authority over the subject and stake a claim to it. This seems to have been the case for Fakhr-i Da'i Gilani and Qari 'Abdullah, translators in a period of nationalist authority and Persianate modernity, whereas in the earlier Afghan group project no individual voice wished to shine through in the translation. Clearly individual personalities and institutional positions played a role in the differences in translation, perhaps much more so than any perceived linguistic differences between Afghan and Iranian Persian.

Important context for these differences is also to be found in the distinct relationships Afghanistan and Iran had with India. The ruler of Afghanistan, Amir 'Abd al-Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901), had invited Shibli to visit Afghanistan so that the Ministry of Education could learn more about Shibli's educational reforms in India.⁸⁸ While Shibli was unable to make the trip, his protégé Sayyid Sulayman Nadvi visited. Later Afghan rulers like Muhammad Nadir Shah, born and educated in the northern Indian city of Dehradun, spoke Urdu fluently. At his behest, Amir Habibullah (r. 1901–19) visited Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in India.⁸⁹ There was no such equivalent of the Iranian government systematically learning from India; by contrast, when the poet Rabindranath Tagore was invited to Iran from India in 1932, he was lauded but also seen by Iranians as a relic of the past, a living embodiment of ancient Indo-Iranian shared heritage.⁹⁰

Iranian national chauvinism may have been an additional factor, with its claims to the Persian literary heritage made possible by an increasingly powerful state and institutions such as the University of Tehran. As much as Shibli was praised by Iranian scholars like Fakhr-i Da'i, Sa'id Nafisi, Muhammad-Taqi Bahar, and Zayn al-'Abidin Mu'taman, they also maintained a sense of being the proper heirs to the Persian literary corpus, such that an Iranian like Fakhr-i Da'i could confidently correct someone like Shibli; however much the Iranians respected Shibli's knowledge, they ultimately saw him as outsider to what they considered an Iranian tradition. Indeed, Nafisi remarks with wonder that Shibli never set foot in

⁸⁶ Azad, *Sukhandan-i Fars*, 12.

⁸⁷ Azad, *Sukhandan-i Fars* (trans. Qari 'Abdullah), 1.

⁸⁸ Shibli made these reforms after traveling in the Middle East to learn about educational reform there. See Shibli, *Safarnamah*, translated as *Turkey, Egypt, and Syria: A Travelogue*.

⁸⁹ Baqai, "Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan," 212.

⁹⁰ Marashi, *Exile and the Nation*, 105.

Iran.⁹¹ Similarly, Nafisi's characterization of the Afghan translation as different and unfamiliar, despite the linguistic similarities demonstrated above, says much about certain early twentieth-century Iranian assumptions and attitudes toward Afghanistan. The Literary Association of Kabul, for its part, insisted that there was no such linguistic divergence between written Afghan and Iranian Persian at the time.⁹²

These two approaches to translation, Persianate or nationalist, may ultimately reflect where the translators saw themselves, both within their own tradition and in relation to the tradition from which they translated, but they are also reflections of the translators' communities and epistemic conditions. As the Afghans translated *Shi'r al-'Ajam* in the 1920s, their community was still defined in Persianate terms, which meaningfully included other linguistic traditions like Urdu, producing what I term a "cosmopolitan Persianate" translation. In Iran in later decades, translating for a national community (defined by secular relationships), reified by a powerful central state, endowed Fakhr-i Da'i with the authority to confidently intervene in the text through his nationalist, "Persianate modern" translation.

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⁹¹ Fakhr-i Da’i, *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, 3: ha.

⁹² This was in the context of a series of published epistolary exchanges between the Kabul Literary Association and the Iranian journal *Ayandah* in 1945. See Anjuman-i Adabi-yi Kabul, "Pasukh-i Anjuman," 377–78. A possible counterexample can be found in the preface to a Persian translation by the Afghan translator ‘Abd al-Hadi Khan Davi of an Urdu article, published in the journal *Kabul* in 1932. Davi notes the benefits of translating literary material from other countries and adds that Iranian materials "have less need for translation" (*kamtar luzūm-i tarjumah dārand*; Davi, "Abu al-A'la al-Ma'arri va Khayyam," 23). His intriguing use of the word "less" (*kamtar*)—rather than asserting that Iranian Persian has no need of translation—could suggest that he indeed perceived a difference between the written Persian of Iran and Afghanistan. I thank Aria Fani for these references.

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