Theories and Methodologies

Remembering the Persianate in the Modern Novel

ALEXANDER JABBARI

The memory of the Persianate looms large in the era of nation-states. Whether we identify the twentieth century as "late" or "post-" Persianate, or as an era of "Persianate modernity," it is clear that this cosmopolitan framework—usually described as enduring from the ninth to the nineteenth century—did not vanish overnight, nor did it fade without leaving behind literary traces. I explore here how the Persianate is evoked in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Persian and English fiction. I first consider modern Iranian novels in Persian from the 1960s and 1970s and then turn to the anglophone novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah (b. 1948). A close reading of these texts, with particular attention to their Indian characters, shows that the Persianate cosmopolis left lasting traces in modern literature.

The Figure of the Indian in the Pahlavi Era

If the Persianate world had a geographic core, it was arguably north India, whose courts were unrivalled patrons of Persian literature. The Persianate has, therefore, often been remembered in modern literature through the figure of the Indian. Indian characters feature prominently in the Iranian novels I examine here: Sadeq Chubak's سنگ صبور (*Sang-i sabur*; *The Patient Stone*), Simin Daneshvar's سووشون (*Savushun*), and Iraj Pezeshkzad's دائی جان ناپلئون (*Daʾi Jan Napelʾon*; *My Uncle Napoleon*). These representative works show how the image of the Indian occupies an ambivalent position in the Iranian imagination, as foreign and abject yet uncannily familiar; the Indian is a persistent trace of the Persianate that refuses to disappear even at the height of the Pahlavi nationalist project (1925–79).

As modern Iranian nationalism emerged around the turn of the twentieth century, it had to compete with older, Persianate forms of belonging, which were transregional and rooted in a body of literary-

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ethical discursive practices referred to as *adab*. Nationalism did not effect a total epistemological rupture with the prenational Persianate past, as is often assumed. Instead, the two overlapped as nationalism struggled to replace an earlier sense of self that endured and resisted assimilation. In Judith Butler's reading of Sigmund Freud, melancholic identification is a prerequisite for letting go of an object—instead of a decisive final break with the object, letting go involves internalizing and incorporating it, a process through which "the lost object continues to haunt and inhabit the ego as one of its constitutive identifications" (134). In modern Iranian literature, the figure of the Indian is this melancholic object, standing in for a Persianate world not altogether lost but ambivalently internalized. As Mana Kia contends, at the turn of the twentieth century, while "the Persianate self became explicitly (Iranian) national, the Indian friend was still present, and indeed integral to this emergence" of modern, national identities (399).

Iranian nationalism is cultivated, at least in part, through proscribing prenational affinities. The Iranian national self is defined against others like the Indian, whose familiarity is an uncomfortable reminder of the prenational Persianate framework. In this way the Indian is marked as out of time and place, representing the past for modern Iranians. Afshin Marashi has argued that during the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore's highly publicized 1932 visit to Iran, Tagore was presented to the Iranian public as a living relic of the ancient Indo-Iranian shared past. Reza Zia-Ebrahimi claims that Maneckji Limji Hatariya, an Indian Parsi, was perceived similarly by Iranians, "as the living memory of Iran's past, as if he had just walked out of a time capsule" (82). This perception can be observed in several Pahlavi-era Iranian novels in which Indian characters haunt the present as specters of an Indo-Iranian past that modern Iranians struggle to incorporate. These novels make Indians objects of contempt in order to maintain a boundary between the Persianate past and the national present.

Sadeq Chubak's *The Patient Stone* (1966), for instance, features an especially abject Indian character, Sayyed Vakili Saheb Sayf al-Qalam. Sayf al-Qalam is an Indian doctor turned serial killer who preys on poor women and sex workers in Shiraz. His character is based on the historical figure of Sayyed Mohammad-ʿAli Vakili Saheb Sayf al-Qalam, who murdered several women in Shiraz in the mid-1930s. *The Patient Stone*'s Sayf al-Qalam is deformed in both looks and speech; his strange name, ridiculous appearance, foreign garb, and bookish, heavily Indian-accented Persian make him the butt of jokes. He is a religious fanatic who claims to be divinely inspired and a racialized foreigner who poses a menace to Iranian women. Chubak incessantly reminds the reader that Sayf al-Qalam is Indian. He is constantly identified as Indian by the narrator and other characters, and he marks himself as Indian through his own repeated references to India or Hyderabad. The Indian characters of *My Uncle Napoleon* and *Savushun* are similarly identified to readers in ways that highlight their ambivalent status in Iran as both familiar and foreign.

The Indian presence in modern Iran was bound up not only with Persianate connections across the Indian Ocean but also with the British empire. In 1941, fearing that Iran would ally with the Axis powers, the British and the Soviets invaded Iran, deposing Reza Shah and occupying the country through the end of the Second World War. The occupation was made possible in part with the help of the British Indian Army, which deployed thousands of Indian soldiers to Iran. The Allied occupation is the setting for Iraj Pezeshkzad's satiric family drama, *My Uncle Napoleon* (1976). The novel's Indian characters are marked as outsiders, not only out of place, but out of time, anachronistic symbols of the Persianate past. This uncanniness is used to comedic effect, but it also reveals an anxiety about prenational memories that continue to haunt the present.

From the first instance in which he is mentioned (Pezeshkzad, *Daʾi Jan* 189) until the last (456), the novel's main Indian character, Maharat Khan, is almost always explicitly identified as هندی ("Indian") or هندیه ("the Indian"), as if to remind the reader that despite his Persian name and tongue, Maharat Khan is not Iranian, but a foreigner. Maharat Khan is not even the character's real name; as the narrator says:

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خیال میکنم اسم واقعیش " بهارات " یا "بهارت " بود ولی در محله ما باو سردار" مهارت خان" میگفتند (189)

I think his real name was Baharat or Baharot but in our area they always called him Brigadier Maharat Khan. (*My Uncle* 218)

This name is in fact a subtle reference to India, which is *bhārat* in Hindi/Urdu, and other Indian languages, spelled identically to *Baharat* in Persian.

Pezeshkzad's characters mock the Indians' speech and appearance, linking language and physiognomy. The character of Taymur Khan, for example, is not explicitly labeled "the Indian" the way Maharat Khan is, but his name is typical among Indian Muslims and he is described as speaking affected Persian, با لهجه ای که اهالی شبه قاره هند فارسی حرف میزنند ("with the accent of someone from the Indian subcontinent"; 87; 110). Just as his Persian is described as unusual, so are his physical features: he has a قیافه عجیبی ("strange appearance"), and his facial features and hands are مثل آدمهائی که به بیماری داء الفیل مبتلی هستند بیقواره و درشت ("heavy and shapeless like those of a person suffering from elephantitis"; 87; 110). Maharat Khan also embodies the connection between deformity in appearance and in language: he is شیر قهوه ای تمام عیار ("a dyed-in-the-wool milky-coffee-colored [Sikh]"; 395; 433) who speaks Persian بطرز و لهجه خاصی ("in an idiosyncratic way and with an accent"; 196; 226). He wears a turban and has زلف سیاه و بلند ("long black hair") features that identify him as a Sikh for the Iranian characters (271; 301). He is marked, therefore, as neither the Iranians' Muslim coreligionist nor a Zoroastrian Parsi with whom they might identify culturally; the Persianate past is the only framework through which the Iranians can make sense of this Persian-speaking Indian. Both Indian characters are living relics of this past, marked as dark-skinned and deficient in speech, deformed as if by the time warp that transported them to modern Iran.

Maharat Khan's accented Persian speech is littered with untranslated Hindi words like *bahut* ("very") and *kartā hai* ("does"), as well as shibboleths of Indo-Persian like *sāheb* ("sir"; e.g., 227). *Sāheb* is not a foreign word like *bahut* but a Persian word that sounds antiquated to the contemporary Iranian reader—the Indians' speech harks back to an older era in which Iranians and Indians alike spoke Persian and used *sāheb* as a title of respect.

Untrustworthy Indians also stalk the pages of Simin Daneshvar's *Savushun* (1969). The novel rivals *My Uncle Napoleon*'s popularity and is often claimed to be the best-selling Persian novel of all time (Milani 183). Like *My Uncle Napoleon*, it is set in Iran under the Allied occupation, and it similarly features swarthy Indian soldiers, though here they are not comic but rather ominous figures. While these Indian characters play less central roles than those in Chubak's and Pezeshkzad's novels, when they do come to the fore, they combine phenotypical difference with broken Persian and prurient sexuality. One female Iranian character in *Savushun* remarks:

راست میروی، چپ میروی، یک سیاه سوختهٔ هندی میگذارد دنبالت و میگوید: - بیبی، لازم ! بیبی، لازم!
(Daneshvar [1349] 57)

Wherever you turn, some dark Indian chases you and says, "Lady need! Lady need!"
(Daneshvar [2011] 70)

In a later scene, the novel's female protagonist passes by an Indian soldier urinating on the side of the road. As she passes him, با تمام بدن و شلوار باز به طرفش گشت و گفت: بیبی لازم! ("he turned his whole body toward her, his trousers still open, and said, 'Lady need!'"; 120–21; 133). The male soldiers frequent brothels (18; 34), and the novel's one female Indian character is an exotic dancer, Sudabeh. Like *My Uncle Napoleon*'s Indians, she bears a common Persian name and must therefore be explicitly identified as هندی ("the Indian"; 74; 86) or lambasted as آن لکاتهٔ رقاص، سودابه هندی ("that Indian slut of a dancer"; 25; 40). In *Savushun*, as in the other modern Iranian novels discussed here, Indian characters embody the Persianate past. The boundaries between that past and the present, or between prenational collectives and the Iranian national self, are demarcated

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by rendering abject these unwelcome ghosts of the bygone cosmopolis.

The Swahili Coast in the Persianate Cosmopolis

From another shore of the Indian Ocean, the Tanzanian-born author Abdulrazak Gurnah's oeuvre also contains echoes of the Persianate. The Persianate is often described as a world of Persian letters, defined in relation to a loosely shared canon of medieval literary texts. Gurnah connects his East African settings with this literary tradition through references to Firdawsī's eleventh-century epic, the *Shahnamah* (*Gravel Heart* 37; *Last Gift* 215). His characters, too, inflect their speech with allusions to Persian literature. "If there is paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here," Mohammed Abdalla recites in *Paradise*, a couplet attributed to the Indo-Persian poet Amir Khusraw (115). It is significant that Gurnah's Persianate references, like this line, are often Indian.

East Africa is less often included in scholarship sketching the frontiers of the Persianate, but Gurnah's native Zanzibar was indeed one of the margins of this expansive cosmopolis. It was long connected to places like Shiraz via Indian Ocean trade routes and was home to substantial north Indian communities. The sites Gurnah references connect his East Africa to an Indian Ocean world, as other scholars have noted (see, e.g., Kumavie). But he alludes not only to Indian Ocean ports—Bombay, Java, Persia (*Admiring Silence* 155)—but to a broader Islamic world and, more specifically, a perceptibly Persianate one. Landlocked locales of Persianate inland Eurasia feature just as prominently: Bukhara, Tashkent, Herat (*Paradise* 105), and, above all, India.

As with the Iranian novels discussed above, in Gurnah's novels it is Indians who are most often bearers of Persianate culture and whose presence therefore evokes the memory of the Persianate. While Iranians appear in various roles in several books, as well as Swahili speakers who trace their origins to Shiraz (*Memory* 31), Indians—among them Sikhs, Parsis, Baluchis, and Gujarati merchants—are ubiquitous across Gurnah's body of work. Not one of his ten novels is without Indian characters.

Shahab Ahmed has worried that the term *Persianate* places too much emphasis on the linguistic element, at the expense of other components (like Islam) that constituted what he prefers to term the "Balkans-to-Bengal complex" (32; see also 83–85). Iran was not necessarily central—if anywhere could be said to occupy pride of place in the Persianate cosmopolis it would be India, where wealthy courts patronized Persian literary production. But it was the role of Persian as a language of learning and administration that regions like the Balkans and Bengal (but not, say, the Maghreb) had in common, after all. The shared use of Persian left linguistic traces on the vernacular languages of this cosmopolis. James Pickett offers the helpful metaphor of Russian nesting dolls to illustrate the way the Persianate functioned as a vernacular of a larger Arabic cosmopolis and at the same time constituted a cosmopolis unto itself, containing regional vernaculars like Urdu and Turkish (26–34). Today, these languages—which came to supersede Persian as major vehicles of national culture—count many thousands of Persianate loanwords among their vocabularies. As Nile Green explains, "Urdu did serve as a trans-regional lingua franca around the Indian Ocean"—including in eastern and southern Africa—and "for its Muslim users, it served to connect them to the older literary traditions of Arabic and Persian that had spread through the region in previous centuries" (177).

Gurnah writes exclusively in English, but it is an English frequently interspersed with unglossed foreign vocabulary. This seemingly exotic vocabulary is shared by narrators and characters of African, Arab, Indian, and European origin alike. A British Council officer, for example, speaks with "sentences . . . studded with words like palaver, badmash, hatari, inshaalah" (*Desertion* 211).[1] Anglo-Indian terms like *pukka* and *topee* share space with Persian, Arabic, and Swahili words in Gurnah's prose.

Far from a foreignizing gesture, however, Gurnah's literary language draws from Swahili's Persian- and Arabic-derived vocabulary, rendering it familiar to any speaker of a Persianate language

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while still retaining the specificity of Swahili pronunciation and orthography. Take as an example the Swahili word *rangi*, meaning "color," in *Memory of Departure* (30). It is immediately intelligible as a loan from the Persian *rang*, yet it appears in its Swahili form with a final vowel, bound by the rules of Swahili phonology, which forbid ending a syllable with a consonant. Another word Gurnah uses repeatedly—*nahodha* ("sea captain")—is etymologically Persian (from *nākhodā*), but is common across the Indian Ocean. The word was borrowed into Arabic and is spelled in his work according to Swahili convention (which does not generally distinguish between [h] and [kh]). His choice of Swahili vocabulary, then, is not haphazard, nor is it intelligible only to Swahili-speaking readers. In this way, Gurnah eludes facile binaries of insider/outsider and foreignizing/domesticating effects, producing instead a language that is at once universally Islamic and particularly Swahili.

While the core of the Persianate has typically been taken to be language and *adab*, these have never been its only shared components. What is less often attended to in literary and historical studies are the sensorial elements of this interconnected space. Gurnah's novels capture this aspect of the Persianate in rich detail. His settings—often Zanzibar but also elsewhere in East Africa as well as immigrant enclaves in Europe—are imbued with the aromas and flavors of the Persianate world. Perhaps chief among them are rosewater and rose oil, which perfume the air in shrines and saturate syrupy desserts across this far-flung geography (Aʿlam). In Gurnah's *Afterlives*, rosewater appears as a commodity to be traded (79) and lends a sacred air to an exorcism ceremony (285), and it is sprinkled across the pages of his other novels as well, adding festivity to Eid celebrations in *The Last Gift* (43) and a wedding in *Paradise* (243), for instance.

The tastes of Gurnah's novels also bear traces of Indian Ocean trade and a Persianate palate. An Eid feast in *Paradise* includes "the best Peshawar rice, glistening with ghee and dotted with sultanas and almonds" (8–9). Meals reveal the Swahili coast's connections to the Indo-Persianate world in the form of samosas, bajia, pilau, cachumbar, biryani, parathas, jalebis, and occasionally simply "Indian food." These aromas and flavors give Gurnah's writing a synesthetic quality. They evoke a Persianate Islam that was never confined to mosques or sacred manuscripts and was experienced as much through taste and smell as through prayer and Qurʾan recitation. Gurnah acknowledges as much in *By the Sea*, noting the interplay between aroma, place, and memory:

> a smell that recalls a music whose melody is out of range, the memory of a room when the house or its location is forgotten. . . . So time dismembers the images of our time. Or to put it in an archaeological way, it is as if the details of our lives have accumulated in layers, and now some layers have been displaced by the friction of other events, and bits of contingent pieces still remain, accidentally tumbled about. (142)

This reflection offers an approach to Gurnah's novels themselves: the violent rupture of colonialism—a theme dealt with in each of his works—reveals layers of earlier history, including fragments of the Persianate past.

But Gurnah is too subtle a writer to simply present a nostalgic vision of a Persianate cosmopolis disrupted by colonial power. European colonialism does not merely undo Persianate connections; instead, the British empire participates in the Persianate tradition (see Jabbari). As was the case in Iran, many of the Indians in Gurnah's East Africa are reminders not only of a Persianate era but of a British colonial one as well. Nor does the Persianate cosmopolis symbolize a halcyon innocence for Gurnah; his Persianate pasts, colonial presents, and postcolonial futures are all marked by violence and exploitation. In *By the Sea*, for example, a wealthy Persian pederast preys on young "native" boys (e.g., 24), recalling how, for some twentieth-century modernizers in Eurasia, the Persianate—epitomized by the ghazal and its homoerotic aesthetics—came to represent a sexually degenerate past that must be rejected (see Hodgkin). Arabs, Indians, Iranians, Europeans, and others are equally rapacious. "Natives," too, are just as implicated. Several of Gurnah's novels depict anticolonial, nationalist "awakenings" in Zanzibar and elsewhere—a

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process wherein national identities replaced the cosmopolitan logic of the Persianate. The violence and deprivations that followed the Zanzibar revolution of 1964 "made many people remember that they were Arabs or Indians or Iranians," reads *Gravel Heart*, "and they resuscitated connections they had allowed to wither" (180). Thousands of "Asians" and "Arabs," as they were called, were killed or driven out.

The memory of the prenational Persianate haunts the nation-state, whether in Pahlavi Iran or postcolonial Tanzania, as we have seen in the two sets of novels examined here. In the Iranian novels, Indian characters—as symbols of the Persianate—are rendered abject, their prurient behavior and deformed bodies marking the boundaries between the Persianate past and the national present. In contrast, Gurnah (who is deeply ambivalent about the past and the present alike) evokes the Persianate in his novels as much through tastes, smells, and words as through bodies. Gurnah's corpus in particular can be likened to a ghazal, that most archetypal of Persianate literary genres. Instead of forming a straightforward series, Gurnah's novels come together like the couplets of a ghazal: they rhyme and are thematically linked, addressing the same *mazmun* ("proposition") while not needing to be read in order. Reading these novels in relation to the Persianate offers literary studies an alternative to Pascale Casanova's model of world literature: they inhabit not a world republic of letters, but a centerless Persianate network organically linked by Indian Ocean routes.

Note

1. *Palaver* ("talk") originated as Portuguese nautical slang derived from *palavra* ("word"); *badmash* ("rogue") is from the Persian *bad-maʿāsh* through Hindi/Urdu; hatari ("danger") is the Swahili form of the Arabic *khaṭar*; *inshaalah* [sic] is ubiquitously Islamic, etymologically Arabic but not specific to any one language.

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