

GUEST COLUMN

Persianate Words and Worlds: Introduction to “The Persianate”

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The term *Persianate* was coined in the late 1960s by the historian Marshall Hodgson and appeared in print for the first time in 1974, in his three-volume *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. He used it to conceptualize the region “from the Balkans to Bengal” (96), which between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a particular form of political and literary flourishing afforded by the unprecedented material power of Islam and the aesthetic contributions of court cultures in the Ottoman, Timurid, Safavid, and Mughal empires of West, Central, and South Asia. The Persianate world, as it has come to be called in the wake of Hodgson’s work, was transregional and pluralistic in myriad ways, but it is typically considered to have been unified at least in part by Persian literary culture, Persian social form and public decorum (*adab*),¹ and most specifically the Persian language. “Up until the early nineteenth century,” Mana Kia writes in *Persianate Selves*, “Persian was the language of power and learning across Central, South, and West Asia” (4). Though this massive region was composed of numerous ethnicities, religions, and local languages, Persian served as what Bert Fragner has called its “transregionale Kontaktsprache” (“transregional contact language”; 33),² the language both of a robust and widely shared literary discourse and of governance, diplomacy, and global exchange. Persian was, as Nile Green has put it, Eurasia’s “lingua franca,” before it would be replaced by other imperial languages from the nineteenth century onward, particularly English, Russian, and Chinese (1).

The conceptual vocabulary of the Persianate would not start to gain traction, as Assef Ashraf has noted, until the 1990s (1). But it has since had enduring consequences for how scholars study and

talk about the interrelated cultures and societies forming the geographic region that Shahab Ahmed has famously termed the "Balkans-to-Bengal complex" (32). Thinking in terms of the linguistic currents and cultural trajectories of Persian—as well as the powerful reach and influence of Islam—rather than the protective nationalist discourses of Iran as a nation-state, scholars have used the framework of the Persianate to disarticulate language and literary tradition from the belated political formations of colonial modernity and the balkanized scholarly rubrics that have attended it in the academy. It has allowed scholars to conceptualize the significance of the region of Kashmir, for instance, to the history and tropology of classical Persian poetry, as in Sunil Sharma's *Mughal Arcadia*, or to historicize transnational textual practices across Iran, Afghanistan, India, and the Soviet East that have otherwise been artificially fragmented according to language and ethnicity, as in Aria Fani and Kevin L. Schwartz's recent special issue of *Iranian Studies* entitled *Persianate Pasts; National Presents: Persian Literary and Cultural Production in the Twentieth Century*. Having reached full institutional recognition in 2002 with the establishment of the Association for the Study of Persianate Societies and the first issue of the *Journal of Persianate Studies* in 2008, *Persianate* is now a term used in job advertisements, faculty research profiles, workshop titles, and course catalogs; it is examined at length in monographs, special issues, conferences, and critical volumes. It is an umbrella term—an umbrella concept—now used regularly to describe work being done by scholars of the history, politics, culture, religion, art, language, and literature of South Asia, Iran, Central Asia, the Soviet East, East Asia, and most recently Africa. "A consensus has emerged," as Ashraf has recently put it after noting this critical mass of scholarly activity, "that something called 'the Persianate world' did exist" (1).

Despite the archivally rigorous, theoretically and disciplinarily expansive kind of scholarship being done with the Persianate as its conceptual rationale, this globally vast field of study has yet to be pulled into the spotlight of literary studies, its

affordances and limits interrogated in an institutionally centralized venue such as *PMLA*. Thus, the primary aim of this *Theories and Methodologies* special feature is to showcase this work to the discipline of language and literature writ large. The essayists gathered here examine the aesthetic, cultural, linguistic, political, religious, economic, and social currents that both construct what has come to be called the Persianate world and compromise it at key moments not just in history but also in certain analytic contexts. In the process, they show the directions the field has taken most recently, which challenge some of the originary premises of the Persianate concerning language, ethnicity, periodization, and aesthetic form. Most ambitiously, the essays demonstrate how the concept of the Persianate offers pathways toward addressing various methodological problems that still beset literary studies. The Persianate delimits a transregional, imperially organized world connected through language, culture, and oceanic trade routes rather than the bureaucratic strictures of the nation-state and its defensive cultural and ethnic nationalisms. Accordingly, what is evident in the essays gathered here is that the framework of the Persianate is not just geographically but also disciplinarily "centerless," as Alexander Jabbari puts it in his essay, reaching across different modes of literary and cultural study, historiography, and philology. As a result, the essays show that thinking with and through the Persianate has the potential to allow more scholars to overcome roadblocks that often still get in the way of working across fields, periods, and disciplines including English, comparative literature, history, religious studies, Iranian studies, South Asian studies, Afghan and Afghanistan studies, and other area studies across periods. This disciplinary variety has implications, too, for what constitutes the literary in the Persianate paradigm, since the essayists show that not just poetry and fiction but also histories, religious texts, song lyrics, textbooks, and various other kinds of writing make up the vast, porous, and polyvocal textual world of the Persianate. As the question of the literary drifts in and out of view across the pieces, readers are encouraged to consider what the Persianate makes possible both in and

beyond comparative literary critical analysis. In service of that aim, the section features a mixture of scholars who work both within and outside Persianate studies to explore the methodological affordances, as well as the limits, of this line of inquiry.

To be clear, the Persianate world did have primary sites of cultural production and exchange, urban centers of power such as Isfahan, Herat, Kashmir, and Delhi. But one of the central interventions of these essays is that taken together, they emphasize the polycentric nature of the Persianate and Islamicate world even more than did the classical understanding of this transregional ecumene. They do so, first, by decentering the Persian language itself. If the standard take has been that the Persian language, literary tradition, and conventions of social form (*adab*) were the collectively cohesive agents connecting the otherwise vastly heterogeneous geographic space of premodern Eurasia, the essayists show that that assumption can no longer be taken for granted.

For instance, after naming a list of spoken, sung, and written languages that formed various “local literary contexts” within the premodern Balkans-to-Bengal complex—such as Armenian, Hindavi, and Chaghatay—Fani, Schwartz, and Samuel Hodgkin insist that there existed in the Persianate world an “entire protocol for literariness outside the linguistic confines of Persian.” This observation is validated by several of the other essays, such as David Brophy’s, which examines the history of literary patronage in eastern Turkistan (today’s Xinjiang region of China) during the Qing period (1636–1912), the patterns and significance of Turkic and Chaghatay translations of the classical Persian literary idiom among China’s Turkic-speaking Muslims. In his recent book *The Making of Persianate Modernity*, Jabbari demonstrates how one of the ways that the Persianate framework transformed and extended into the era of the nation-state, which scholars have long argued officially ended it, was through literary historiographies written in post-1857 India in Urdu. In his essay for this feature, Jabbari expands on that work by studying the traces of the South Asian Persianate linguistic landscape in

the English-language novels of Abdulrazak Gurnah and the permeation of the Swahili in those novels with Persian vocabulary. Similarly, through examinations of modern and contemporary works of Persian fiction, Iranian cinema, and popular music, Atefeh Akbari Shahmirzadi examines the multilingualism of the modern Iranian nation-state—the coexistence of standard Persian, for instance, with Khuzestani Arabic and Gilaki (spoken in the northern-Iranian province of Gilan). This extreme linguistic heterogeneity, Akbari shows, undermines even the most stringent attempts on the part of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–79) to standardize a national Iranian language and ethnoracial identity and evinces just one of the ways that the multilingualism of the premodern Persianate world gets extended into postcolonial modernity.

Indeed, part and parcel of these essays’ refusal to take for granted the image of linguistic unity dominating an earlier iteration of Persianate scholarly discourse is a commitment to complicating what might be called the liberatory valences of the Balkans-to-Bengal complex along the lines of race and ethnicity. Most of the essays here shore up what Green has called the “fault lines” of the Persianate world’s putative cosmopolitan unity (2), providing robust evidence for the ways that that unity was in fact defined by deep lines of division that were by no means engendered by the emergence of the modern nation-state, but that long predated it. Some background information here will be helpful.

Integral to the critical élan of the Persianate as a scholarly discourse was a commitment to challenging the virulent narrative of Iranian exceptionalism that had previously dominated the study of the Persian language and literary tradition, a narrative that hit its high-water mark during the Pahlavi regime and had found its way into Iranian scholarly discourse starting approximately in the early twentieth century.³ What Jabbari calls the Pahlavis’ “standardization efforts” were aimed at privileging a standard Persian over the “mutually unintelligible and highly divergent” dialects and languages spoken in everyday life not just in the premodern Persianate world but also in the modern Iranian nation-state (3). The Pahlavi regime coupled those linguistic

efforts with the claim that Iranians were racially and ethnically pure relative especially to their South Asian and Arab neighbors. It was during this period of Iranian history, as Nedah Maghbooleh has recently argued, that the national narrative of Iranians as an Aryan race rose to prominence (49–79). Anahid Nersessian and Manu Samriti Chander show in their essay here that that narrative also has at least some of its roots in the racial hierarchizations integral to Kant's and Hegel's philosophies of reason, beauty, and history. The figure of the Persian—*die Perser*—in much Enlightenment writing is pit as simultaneously inferior to European whites and superior to other members of the Persianate cosmopolis, such as Indians and Chinese. The project of nation building in Iran from the 1920s onward not only "prioritized," as Beeta Baghoolzadeh has written, but essentially invented "a Persian, Aryan ethno-racial identity as the ideal Iranian" (445), one of whose chief inheritances, according to its own narrative, was the illustrious and historically influential tradition of courtly Persian letters and its attendant social forms (*adab*). This whitened understanding of the Persian would come under considerable threat after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini and the hostage crisis of 1979 to 1981. The revolution led to the mass immigration of Iranians to other parts of Eurasia and the United States and contributed to the conflation, especially in the US and European imagination, of Iranian-ness with Muslim fundamentalism. But already by the mid-century, the ideological investment on the part of many Iranians to lay claim to the Persian literary tradition as theirs alone had reached its height.

Thus, a central objective of the emergence of the Persianate as a scholarly project was to defamiliarize and historicize this pervasive nationalist narrative. By disarticulating literary works like the classical Persian poetry of Hafiz, Rumi, and Sa'di, or Firdawsī's epic شاهنامه (*Shahnameh; Book of Kings*), from the history of the state of Iran proper, this project instead recontextualized that literary tradition within a transregional ecumene. It revealed the histories and patterns of circulation that allowed that linguistic, literary, and social paradigm to traverse,

grow relevant to, and generate a sense of belonging among the numerous peoples of a geographically and culturally capacious world that included regions such as modern-day India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China. There was, in short, an important political project underpinning this scholarly gesture. The Persianate as an analytic heuristic offered a way of thinking and describing a unifying cosmopolitanism that, in predating the rise of the nation-state, also managed to avoid succumbing to nationalistic exceptionalisms by placing the history of Persian letters within a cultural and geographic context that included but was not limited to vast swathes of the Global South. Indeed, the Persian language and the Persianate have what those new to this field will no doubt recognize as a protean relationship to the category and histories of empire—at once consonant with empire (even, as in the case of Supriya Gandhi's examination of postcolonial India, with European empire), but just as often exceeding not simply the parameters of the state but also maps of imperial domination. The essayists show that this variability is central to the intellectual challenge of examining the history of the Persian language and the Persianate as a global, political, and cultural framework.

Accordingly, the pieces gathered here suggest that a significant epistemic shift is taking place within that original, denationalizing scholarly gesture, a shift whose most obvious forebear might be the 2019 critical volume *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*, edited by Green. In turning to literal and figurative "frontiers" and "fault lines" as models for thinking about the Persianate ecumene, that collection started to move away from what Green in his response essay here refers to as the narrative of "sameness" organizing the putatively cosmopolitan Persianate world. In line with the aims of that volume, the essayists in this feature reveal the various contexts and circumstances in which the internal contradictions of that unity become glaringly apparent. Nicole Ferreira, for instance, examines how the felt supremacy of Persian courtly culture in premodern Eurasia depended in large part on the systematic derision of Afghans, who were described by several

early modern Persian historians as lacking the sophistication and breeding necessary for the successful achievement of the social and ethical ideals associated with *adab*. Instead of accepting these accounts as true, however, Afghan authors reappropriated the very Persian literary discourse that ridiculed them and created an alternative literary discourse that reconceptualized these putative character defects as positive attributes of Afghan communities (a term that has historically referred to Pashtun peoples). Similarly, Gandhi's essay shows that although Persian was considered a beloved language of poetry and prestige, during British colonial rule it became increasingly associated with Islam and thus became a key source of ethnic and religious division, leading to what Gandhi calls a "fraught intimacy" between Muslims and Hindus. The tensions between Persians and Indians suggested in Gandhi's and in Nersessian and Chander's essays are picked up in Jabbari's examination of the figure of the Indian in the modern Persian novel. A recurring character depicted as variously worthy of derision and fear, the Indian represents for Jabbari the ambivalence with which the modern, nationalized Iranian self must strenuously disavow the heterogeneous premodern Persianate past in order for its nationalist narrative to hold water. Finally, Fani, Schwartz, and Hodgkin's study of the contemporary Afghan poet Mohammad Kazem Kazemi and the Uzbek writer Hamid Ismailov explores how national modernity falsely atomizes the divisive cultural and linguistic hierarchizations that the narrative of premodern Persianate cosmopolitanism had tended to obscure.

As becomes especially clear in the work of Akbari; Fani, Schwartz, and Hodgkin; Gandhi; and Jabbari, one of the most exciting and productive developments in the scholarship on the Persianate and Islamicate worlds is an expansion in periodization. Because the heyday of the Persianate cosmopolis is typically considered to have been between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, it has primarily lain within the scholarly purview of early modernists. Fani, Hodgkin, Jabbari, and Schwartz, however, have been at the forefront of a new movement in the field that examines what Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi

first called "Persianate modernity" (x). The transregionalist orientation of premodern Islamic Eurasia, Fani and Schwartz explain, "continued to shape and inflect cultural and literary production in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (605). This period witnessed the rise of the colonially manufactured borders of the nation-state and, subsequently, national literatures and claims to standardized national languages and ethnicities. But this period was nevertheless marked, they write, "not so much by the undoing [of the Persianate world] in toto, but by its redeployment, reimagining, and regeneration in new cultural guises and (trans)national contexts" (605). Hence the palpable applicability of the dynamic movement between "familiarity" and "distance" that Catherine Ambler finds in the poetic references in the odes of the late-seventeenth-century poet Shawkat Bukhārī to the "Persianate heteroglossia" animating the colonial and postcolonial works that Fani, Schwartz, and Hodgkin examine. These essayists, along with Akbari, Gandhi, and Jabbari, show that Persianate transregionalism by no means disappears in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries; rather, its often "fraught" afterlives, to borrow Gandhi's useful term once again, must simply be more carefully examined on a granular level and with a healthy dose of irreverence toward the boundaries artificially drawn by area studies and the Anglocentric discourse of world literature.

All these developments in the scholarship are culminating in generative considerations of method. Whether by example or theorization, these essays demonstrate that like all scholarly monikers, the Persianate can be as limiting as it is useful. In *The Making of Persianate Modernity*, Jabbari laments the mutually obstructed channels of communication between Iranian studies and South Asian studies, arguing that it is largely because of these disciplinary impasses in the atomized study of South-South relations that considerations of the afterlives of the Persianate world in colonial modernity have not had the chance to flourish. Several of the authors here likewise make clear that if scholars are to attend to the ways that South-South currents of cultural

production and circulation took and continue to take place—not in nigh-utopic modalities of cosmopolitan heterogeneity but in deeply complex, often politically vexed and uneven constellations of exchange—then they must put pressure on what Kia and Afshin Marashi call the “self-referential political ontologies” and attendant “intellectual genealogies” left over from “mid-twentieth-century area studies paradigms” (380). It is in being committed to such a project that scholars are able to reckon, for instance, with Afghans’ response to their derision by premodern Persian historiography (Ferreira), the ramifications of Chaghatay translations of Persian letters on the development of Uighur literature (Brophy), the implications of the place of India and the Persian language in the African literary landscape of Gurnah (Jabbari), the significance of jazz and Afro-pop to the aural world of the contemporary southern-Iranian band Damahi (Akbari), or the Persian and Qur’anic valences permeating the literature of postcolonial India (Gandhi). Be it in Fani, Schwartz, and Hodgkin’s examination of the Persianate relative to the “persophone” and its problematic proximity to the colonially undergirded categories of the anglophone and the francophone; Akbari’s considerations of the affordances of thinking with Persianate modernity as a means of staging inquiries across English, comparative literature, and Iranian studies; or Green’s final methodological argument for the case study as a way out of the perilous generalities of the Persianate writ large, the scholars of the premodern Persianate world and its legacies are thinking rigorously about not just what new objects fall within their expanding purview but how that expansion needs to be handled.

As humanistic inquiry becomes increasingly global, transnational, multilingual, and cross-disciplinary in its intellectual aims, and as attention to the Global South becomes an imperative across all rather than a small handful of fields, it would behoove scholars of languages and literatures to pay close attention to the achievements and future trajectories of this field, what it is doing, how it is

doing it, and what questions it continues to ask itself as it grows and changes.

NOTES

1. The subject of *adab* is vast, and its various intellectual traditions and social meanings in the Arab-Islamic and Persianate contexts beyond the scope of this introduction or any single one of the essays in this feature, many of which mention it, if only in passing. It is a term that in Persian and Arabic means both literature and ideals of social etiquette and ethical conduct, showing the extent to which the literary was linked to ethical imperatives in Persianate and Islamicate cultures. El Shakry has recently theorized the utility of the concept of *adab* to contemporary methodological debates in Euro-American theory and criticism, tracing particularly its roots in classical Arabic and its relevance in Arab-Islamic literary, social, and religious practice. The word *adab* came into New Persian (the Persian language after the Arab-Islamic conquest of Iran in the eighth century) from Arabic. For more on the Arabic etymology of *adab*, see Patrizi, who argues that the notion of *adab* was shaped in part by the Arab encounter with Sassanian court culture. Though he does not explore this possibility, the Arabic word could itself be a loan from Middle Persian. I am grateful to Alexander Jabbari for his help in clarifying this point.

2. For a fuller examination of Fragner’s concept of a transregional contact language, see Green 4–5.

3. In his book *Reading across Borders*, Fani situates the formation of the discipline of Persian literature within the context of late Qajar and early Pahlavi-era “romantic nationalism” (xiv). See especially chapters 1 and 2.

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