

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Pathways to Persotopias

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The present creates the past it needs. The historian Marshall Hodgson coined the term *Persianate* in 1974, and it has since become a robust concept for assessing the positions and operations of the transregional literary landscape of the Persian language in premodernity (293–94). During the high-water mark of the Persianate transcultural zone, from roughly 1500 to 1850, corresponding to the post-Timurid empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals, Persian was a cultural idiom of exchange for a range of ethnic and religious communities. Its status as the language par excellence of interimperial bureaucratic and diplomatic communication, cultural historiography, and poetry allowed it to maintain a central position.

While the term gestures to the Persian language and today seems to imply an ethnic community of native speakers, this is a harmful narrowing of vision. In fact, Persianate forms proliferated in many places where people did not speak Persian on a day-to-day basis or even write primarily in Persian. From the Balkans to the Bay of Bengal, local and regional vernaculars drew on Persian to help establish their status as literary languages in their own right. At royal and provincial courts, officials created Turkic historiography through Chaghatay translations of Persian histories (DeWeese; Green); in the street, meanwhile, popular singers in languages from Hindavi to Armenian incorporated the motifs and imagery of the Persian lyrical ghazal. In the process, a variety of Persian aesthetic and literary forms entered local linguistic contexts. Cumulatively, these forms constituted an entire protocol for literariness outside the linguistic confines of Persian (Hodgkin). Thus, the Persianate should be understood as a method—as opposed to a cultural unity to be nostalgically celebrated—for apprehending the transhistorical, transregional, and multilingual dimensions of cultural production before the rise of nation-states.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Persian lost its primacy in many communities of writers and readers under the

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pressures of British, Russian, and Chinese colonialism, the romantic ideal of monolingualism, and, ultimately, vernacular state schooling.¹ But despite stark changes to the geographic and political configuration of the global system, Persianate cultural norms were redeployed, reimagined, and regenerated in new cultural guises and in national and transnational contexts. As Aria Fani and Kevin L. Schwartz have noted elsewhere, “Persianate pasts die hard” (605). Thus, if the term *Persianate* prescribes a transregional understanding of premodern and early modern world-making, modernity has splintered Persian into national cultures problematically understood as discrete and bounded.

Given the much diminished place of Persian today, the Persianate is far less methodologically relevant. We thus ask, What alternative frameworks could enable us to track the changing modalities and social contexts of Persian literature in the twenty-first century? For example, the concept of a persophone world—one that engages Persian speakers and readers across national borders (Nölle-Karimi et al.)—resonates with the concepts of anglophone and francophone, which presume to forge inclusive and transnational understandings of these literary traditions.² Anglophone and francophone, some argue, offer a decentered approach, providing space for voices outside (and marginalized within) the metropolitan centers of English and French cultural production. Scholars continue to debate the merit of these categories (Migraine-George; Anam).

But the rubrics of anglophone and francophone are predicated on the enduring legacies of colonialism and imperialism to which they tacitly, if not evasively, refer. Such legacies are not applicable to the case of Persian, since Persianate imperial dynasties did not impose this language on their subjects, many of whom were migratory pastoralists.³ In fact, Mughal emperors like Shah Jahan (who ruled from 1628 to 1658) spoke local languages themselves and patronized poets who composed in Braj. Unlike English, Persian in India had a long lineage that predated the Mughals. These incommensurabilities undermine the efficacy of the concept of a persophone world. Moreover, while the aspirational function of these concepts may be to include minoritized

voices deemed peripheral to colonial and imperial heartlands, such as the continental United States and France, it does so by creating a tautology that excludes as much as it includes. Lauren Elkin conveys this point with clarity:

In France, the idea of a hyphenated identity is unfamiliar, which is why the francophone category is at once so useful and so useless. It covers for all manner of non-French identities, but creates an alternative to Frenchness that is not coextensive with being French. One is either French or francophone, but not both. Francophone signifies “difference,” and that category has served the French in this way for quite some time.

The term *persophone* implies a similar hierarchy. Just as the francophone privileges the French in France, persophone confers a special status on ethnic Persians in Iran, which would place them above Persian speakers in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and elsewhere.⁴ Furthermore, the term obscures the role of Persian in contemporary multilingual, second-language, and macaronic cultural production, whether in music or the arts. Although today’s globalized patterns of multilingualism and creolization are impelled by quite different political and economic forces than their premodern Persianate precursors, those precursors should at least remind us that these forms have always flourished not in monolingual Persian but in the space between languages. Persian, like all languages, has never been contained or singular.

The category of world literature fares no better. Recent scholarship has warned us not to treat world literature as a borderless home for the world’s literary heritages. Many have rightly cautioned us that the “world” of world literature itself is not universally applicable to all times and places (Hayot). All roads lead to English when it comes to world literature, a field that remains beholden to East-West paradigms of comparative study that necessarily involve English as an intellectual pole and a medium of translation, reception, and analysis. Others have problematized the very concept of literature, illustrating that what becomes comprehensible as literary is the by-product

of certain social sensibilities, reading methods, and institutional practices that are contingent on locale, linguistic tradition, and time period. Ultimately, this framework too proves ill-suited to Persian literature, for engagement with Euro-American theories and debates remains an unwritten precondition for scholarship in the field of world literature. Until recently, Persian literature was brought into conversation with world literature through celebratory surveys of the works of Rumi, Hafez, Khayyam, and other canonical figures in English translation (Abedinifard et al.). Going beyond anglophone forms of world-making—and their attendant notions of worldliness and literariness—would therefore require challenging the transactional and unidirectional nature of world literature as a scholarly heuristic.

At its worst, the category of the Persianate is reified in relation to Persian, inevitably recapitulating the model of literary and cultural influence.⁵ At its best, the Persianate complicates unities instead of becoming one. Despite its territorial configuration, area studies is more hospitable than comparative literature to the Persianate as a multidisciplinary and transregional heuristic, both because it has always been methodologically promiscuous and because it has not traditionally incentivized the drive to theorize at the scale of the world that continues to structure comparative literature. As critics of the world-literature framework turn from the (notional, symbolic) scale of the entire globe to more densely connected “significant geographies” (Laachir et al.) or “contact nebulae” (Thorner 2), there is much to learn from the tradition of area studies humanities, with its insistence on the specificity of non-European multilingual canons and philological traditions.

Indeed, in the absence of any overarching Persianate framework to explain Persian literary practices and the language’s global position today, or an adequate alternative to take its place, we must do away with the tendency to look for totalizing categories and instead turn to the modalities, pathways, and life stories that emerge on the granular level, often moving between nation-states or departing from their linguistic and cultural strictures. There are many compelling and understudied

ways in which Persian continues to operate as a transnational and global literary tradition today. In this vein, we use the term *persotopia* not as an alternative to existing categories but as an acknowledgment that the Persianate is as diaphanous as it is long-lived.

Persotopia, then, denotes a wish that future generations of readers and writers will be able to enter non-Eurocentric literary spaces as capacious as the world of Persianate literature. The next sections delve into the profiles of an Afghan poet in Mashhad reviving the maligned *tazah-gui* (“fresh speech”) style in Iran’s literary public and an exiled Uzbek writer using Persian aesthetics and form to structure his novels. These contemporary examples elude a single label or methodology. They destabilize any notion of core and periphery in creative reworkings of the new Persianate. Ultimately, these brief vignettes serve as a reminder of the need to push back against what Pardis Dabashi in her introduction calls “balkanized scholarly rubrics” that help solidify “protective nationalist discourses.”

Mohammad Kazem Kazemi (b. 1968), the veteran Afghan poet and editor who resides in Mashhad, Iran, offers us a rich case study for understanding how the nation-state conditions Persian literary production today and how Persian exceeds and challenges the cultural ideology of the nation-state. Kazemi migrated to Iran in 1984 at the age of seventeen, fleeing a brutal proxy war fought between the Soviet Union and the United States and its allies. More than ten million Afghans were displaced by the Soviet occupation, three million of whom, mostly Persian-speaking communities, went to Iran over the course of the 1980s and 1990s. Kazemi’s career exhibits both the deep precarity and generative power of a fellow Persian speaker and the experience of a racialized other living in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

“I was a novice poet back home,” Kazemi told us in an interview; “in Iran I found the opportunity to become a professional.” Kazemi is a civil engineer by training, and thus the turning point in his literary career was his introduction to the Art Institute in Mashhad, where he found poets willing to give him rigorous and constructive feedback. Kazemi

has been immensely productive: in addition to being a constant at poetic gatherings in Mashhad, he has organized literary festivals; written for and edited poetry columns in Iranian periodicals; published collections of poetry and literary and cultural criticism; produced critical editions of non-Iranian Persian-language poets; and mentored a generation of Afghan-Iranian poets who came of age in Iran. Kazemi serves as a member of the “transnational council” of the hyperconservative Academy of Persian Language and Literature.

Kazemi has even attended Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s poetry readings, drawing criticism from diasporic Iranians who are rightly critical of the regime’s brutal treatment of its people. Kazemi’s attendance at these poetry readings, however, proved short-lived given his advocacy for the plight of his compatriots who endure societal abuse, labor exploitation, and legal uncertainty as Iran’s biggest refugee community (Fani, “One Tongue”). Kazemi’s poem بازگشت (“Bazgasht”; “Return”), composed in 1991, gives expression to this advocacy. It is hard to overemphasize the cultural impact of the poem. The opening lines, which have been translated into English by Adeeba Talukder and Fani, are widely known and recited:

غروب در نفس گرم جاده خواهم رفت
 پیاده آمده بودم پیاده خواهم رفت
 طلسم غربتم امشب شکسته خواهد شد
 و سفره ای که تهی بود بسته خواهد شد
 و در حوالی شبهای عید، همسایه
 صدای گریه نخواستی شنیدی، همسایه
 همان غریبه که قلک نداشت خواهد رفت
 و کودکی که عروسک نداشت خواهد رفت
 (lines 1–8)

At sunset, when the road’s breath is warm, I’ll depart.
 I came here on foot, and on foot I will depart.
 Tonight, the spell of exile will be broken;
 tonight, I will wrap my empty spread.
 Around the nights of celebration, O neighbor,
 you will no longer hear the sound of cries.
 That stranger without a piggy bank, he’ll depart
 and that little girl who has no toys—she, too, will depart.
 (Fani, “One Tongue”)⁶

As Zuzanna Olszewska has observed, Kazemi said in verse what many could not say out loud (203–04).

Similarly, he has approached the question of literary nationalism with unapologetic clarity and courage in his book همزبانی و بی زبانی (2003; *Hamzabani va bizabani; A Shared Language, a Severed Tongue*). In it, he takes to task the nationalist discourses of both his native and his adopted homelands. As Fani has argued in *Reading across Borders*, early-twentieth-century Afghans and Iranians invented their national selves through new ideas about literature, and they did so in company and conversation with one another. In the 1960s, as Pahlavi Iran set out to lay claim to Persian literature as its exclusive cultural patrimony, many in Kabul responded by manufacturing national distinction by adopting the name “Dari” (instead of “Farsi”) in the 1964 constitution. Drawing on his vast philological and historical knowledge, Kazemi has patiently and methodically disproved an entrenched network of national myths about the origins and status of the Persian language. The book made a great impact, particularly in Afghanistan. Given that the term *Farsi* had become radioactive among intellectuals in Afghanistan, stating that Dari and Farsi are unmistakably one language was Kazemi’s way of saying that the emperor has no clothes.

Kazemi’s most consequential intervention may be his work on Abd al-Qader Bidel (d. 1720 or 1721), a Persian-language poet from northern India who posthumously became one of the most controversial and maligned figures in Iranian literary history. Kazemi’s work has been crucial in rehabilitating and reintroducing the South Asian poet’s verse for an Iranian audience. Despite Bidel’s widespread appeal and popularity outside Iran since his death, Iranian historians and scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries charged Bidel with representing the decline of Persian literature because of his promotion of a supposedly overly complicated and abstruse style of poetry known as *tazah-gui*, derisively referred to as the “Indian style” (Schwartz, “Local Lives”). Leveling such a charge at the Indian-born poet served a clear nationalist purpose: it pinned the blame on a non-Iranian poet and geography for “ruining” Persian poetry, thereby justifying its salvation and revival at the hands of an Iranian-born poetic movement

(Schwartz, *Remapping*). Kazemi's book *کلید در باز* (2008); *Kelid-e dar-e baz; Key to an Open Door*) and his ongoing ghazal readings on *Instagram* have helped popularize Bidel's poetry in Iran's literary public. "I would say that I have been a curator of Bidel's poetry," Kazemi told us, "offering the best selections of his verse, and in turn, providing openings for a greater understanding of his works" (Interview). Working from a position of precarity, Kazemi brings Iranians face-to-face with their literary and cultural other, who in this case is also forgotten and silenced. The title of Kazemi's book—*A Shared Language, a Severed Tongue*—condemns the rejection of shared pasts and possible futures as a permanent excision of part of the self.⁷

The Uzbek writer Hamid Ismailov (b. 1954) also deploys the Persianate classics to transcend the double loneliness of nationhood and exile, but with an added multilingual dimension and on an encyclopedic scale. Born in the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, he achieved recognition among late- and post-Soviet russophone and Uzbek writers for his formally experimental verse and novels. Since his forced exile from Uzbekistan, where Persian language and culture are subordinated to Turkic ethno- and linguistic nationalism, Ismailov has excelled at recombining Persianate aesthetics with oral Turkic forms (he calls these traditions "two wings of the same culture," both part of his "cultural DNA" [Interview]) and copious borrowings from the verse of Mandelstam, Li Bai, Lorca, Michelangelo, and other poets from different traditions.

Ismailov's displacement and exile from his homeland—recurring themes in many of his novels—have given him access to a global space of engagement with Persianate literary traditions that national environments do not. This experience is not unlike that of many writers in the Persian literary diaspora, who through choice or by force publish their works abroad, either in English or in English translation, signifying Persian's place in the global book market. Ismailov is an exemplary transnational writer: his books, banned in Uzbekistan, are distributed in their original languages (Uzbek or Russian) on the messaging app *Telegram*, where they become objects of intense

debate. They find more permissive publishing environments when translated into English, French, and other Western languages, at the cost of many missed allusions and implications. But this is not a straightforward case of a national writer's entry, by means of translation, into the economy of world literature. As Ismailov's novels seep through a nationalist dam, they carry with them the rich silt of a specifically Persianate poetic tradition and literary framework.

This Persianate heteroglossia finds its fullest expression in Ismailov's most recent novel, *Bizkim —kompyuterlar; yo, dunyoning eng gözal shoiri: Ghazal shaklidagi roman* (2022; *We Computers; or, The World's Most Beautiful Poet: A Novel in Ghazal Form*).⁸ The novel is narrated by the computer network into which a French programmer-poet has fed the entire canon of Persianate literary classics, with the assistance of an Uzbek friend named Abdulhamid Ismail (referred to throughout by the initials "A.I."). Accordingly, it combines narration of the poet's romantic travails and research into the possibilities of computer-generated poetry with passages alternately transcribed verbatim and pastiched from Chaghatay writers such as 'Alisher Nava'i, Ismail (or Ismailov) and his modern contemporaries, and classical Persian poets, most of all Hafez, with whom the programmer-poet becomes obsessed.

When the quoted text is in Persian, sometimes an Uzbek translation is provided, but not always. This gambit is possible because of the frequent overlap of vocabulary, idioms, and even grammatical constructions between Persian-Tajik and Uzbek, but also the sizable proportion of Uzbeks who are bilingual or at least familiar with Persian literary conventions. Such Persian-Turkic bilingualism cuts both ways. For example, the novel depicts the Turkic bilingualism of Iranians during Ismail's pilgrimage to the tombs of Sa'di and Hafez in Shiraz. Quoting one of the most widely translated lines of Persian poetry in the original Persian (rendered in Cyrillic script in the Tajik fashion), Ismail remarks:

Darvoqe', Hofizning: "Agar on turki sheroziy ba dast orad dili moro, ba kholi hinduyash bakhsham Samarqandu Bukhororo" degan mashhur baytida

turk gözalining paydo bölishi paydo bölishi tasodifiy emas ekan . . . Sherozga kela solib birinchi sarbozga yöliqsamoq, forscha savolimga turkiy javob bersa böladimi. (33–34)

Truly, it's no coincidence that there's a beautiful Turk in Hafez's famous couplet, "If that Shirazi Turk would take my heart in their hand, for their Hindu mole I'd give Samarkand and Bukhara" . . . when I get to Shiraz and ask the first soldier for directions, he answers my Persian-language question in Turkic.⁹

It is in the novel's treatment of Hafez that the avant-garde futurist possibilities of Persianate pasts are raised to the level of an explicit theme. The programmer-poet, having begun with computational stylistics and the procedural generation of literary texts, eventually uses Hafez's ghazals to create a simulated avatar, not of the living poet (of whom legends are numerous but biographical facts limited) but of the persona that speaks in the ghazals. In fact, as the computers remark, "Pirimizning istagi-yu maqsadi —ghazallarning bu hayotdan mustaqilligini isbotlash edi" ("our Teacher's desire and goal was to prove that the ghazals were independent of [Hafez's] life"; 151). That is, the inaccessibility of Hafez the historical person makes him an ideal counterpart for computer-generated poetry. In the programmer-poet's "kompyuter adabiyotining Manifesti" ("Manifesto for computer poetry"), he explains that when a reader chooses what to read among an infinite number of procedurally generated plausible texts, "agar bu matn öquvchi bilan bevosita gaplashar ekan, u ushbu matnni özi ham yozgan bölishi mumkin deganidir" ("if this text seems to enter into direct conversation with the reader, you might as well say that [the reader] wrote this text themself"; 11). This passage is adapted from a 1994 manifesto composed by the French poet and *Action poétique* editor Jean-Pierre Balpe, with whom Ismailov frequently collaborated in his first years of exile and who provides a partial model for the novel's protagonist. Ismailov, however, gives us a far longer genealogy of this theory of reading in the novel's numerous scenes of *fal-e Hafez*: the bibliomantic practice of telling fortunes or answering questions using a randomly selected line or ghazal from the divan or collected works of

Hafez. As the protagonist and his faithful friend A.I. go from the traditional means of consulting Hafez to the construction of a Hafez bot with whom they can converse directly, the novel plays out a variety of scenarios of reading-as-writing grounded in the open, generous Persianate ethos of poetic sociability.

The importance of Ismailov's work has not escaped the attention of Iranian publishers, one of whom noted in the preface to the Persian translation of one of his novels,

ادبیات فارسی را بدون سمرقند و بخارا می توان تصور کرد؟ بدون مرو و هرات؟ بدون گنجه و فرغانه؟

(Publisher's statement 5)

How can one imagine Persian literature without Samarkand and Bukhara? Without Merv or Herat? Without Ganja [in Azerbaijan] and Fergana?

Ismailov's appearance in Iran's literary landscape, alongside compatriots such as Shahzoda Samarqandi (b. 1975), who writes in Persian, suggests an alternative scenario in which non-Eurocentric patterns of multilingualism across the generations might power dynamic, shared literary futures.

Conceptual frameworks like the Persianate and world literature are useful in that they coalesce scholarly energy and institutional resources around certain questions and bodies of work. They were meant to push against homogenizing narratives of cultural singularity, yet both were born already vulnerable to totalizing impulses of their own. World literature and the Persianate may be able to situate the works of Ismailov and Kazemi within a certain system of circulation, but they would not be able to situate them within a singular system of signification.¹⁰ While both Kazemi and Ismailov work within and around the Persian language, it is their engagement with a repertory of cultural forms, aesthetic practices, and literary traditions, more than with the language itself, that highlights formal continuities with Persianate pasts. Operating on the margins and across linguistic and national boundaries, Kazemi, Ismailov, and others like them help delineate a world of persotopias, where the patois of Persian canonical models, genres, and literary

forms fills the cracks that the totalizing frameworks of world literature and the Persianate have either erased or cannot recognize.

Kazemi makes a compelling case for formal continuities in poetics and rhetoric across borders, albeit in a new geographic and cultural configuration. Ismailov, meanwhile, reveals the multilingual and transhistorical dimensions of this continuity. In doing so, both writers draw on a shared set of protocols for literary sociability with the living and the dead. An inquiry into their lives and practices helps recognize the spaces where Persian literary production is charting a path in the twenty-first century as a medium of identity-making and a global language at a remove from the exigencies of national politics. These writers' persotopias represent a rare middle position between the coercive universalization of Euro-American culture and the equally coercive essentialization of national cultures. From this vantage point in the *longue durée* of Eurasian culture, the moment of Western world literature shrinks away to a brief episode between Persianate poets and poetry lovers past and future.

NOTES

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1. Persian would be displaced at varying rates throughout the twentieth century—slowly on the South Asian subcontinent and more rapidly in the Soviet and post-Soviet republics of Central Eurasia—and remain as a national language only in Afghanistan (along with Pashto), Iran, and Tajikistan (where a Cyrillic alphabet further divided colinguals).

2. Scholars distinguish between official francophonie, seen as an extension of empire, and linguistic francophonie. The latter is concerned here. We thank Rich Watts for this point.

3. While pre- and early modern empires largely created Persian's dominance in West, Central, and South Asia, Persian's cultural power included the everyday willed habitus of many individuals and communities (e.g., itinerant poets, Sufi tariqas, traders, artisans) well beyond imperial dynasties that undergirded its use. As such, Persian did not always operate through an imperial lens. Instead, its operation aligned with trajectories of vernacularization as one part of a vital multilingual cultural ecosystem. The framing of Persian as an imperial language—or, worse, a colonial one—in contemporary India and Pakistan is a modern

phenomenon tied up with nativism and Islamophobia. We are grateful to Purnima Dhavan for these insights.

4. Persian as an ethnic category remains slippery and hard to define in contemporary Iran. Elling notes the slippage between Persians as an ethnic community and Persian speakers as a linguistic group (23–26).

5. The Persianate's greatest methodological vulnerability lies in its symbolic relationship to Persian as a linguistic and ethnic category. Ahmed, among others, has sought to dislodge the Persianate's connection to Persian as a linguistic and ethnic category by forging a geographic paradigm called "the Balkans-to-Bengal complex" (32).

6. Talukder and Fani's translation first appeared in *Consequence*, vol. 4, spring 2012.

7. We thank Purnima Dhavan for this insight.

8. Page numbers are cited from an unpublished, edited compilation of the *Telegram* posts comprising the entire novel that was shared with us, which will provide the basis of an English translation by Shelley Fairweather-Vega, to be published by Yale University Press in 2024.

9. Translations are by Samuel Hodgkin unless otherwise noted.

10. We are grateful to Rich Watts for this lucid wording.

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