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# Persian Incursions: The Transnational Dynamics of Persian Literature

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## Introduction

The most recent chapters in Iranian national history would not, at least at first glance, suggest openness to inter- or transcultural interactions. The hostility between Iran and the United States, and other Western governments, dating back to the 1979 revolution and the hostage crisis, have contributed to the representation of an isolationist Iran facing a globalized world. But the political ethos pervading the image of Iran distorts a rich and complex cultural history that is anything but insular, even in the post-revolutionary period. Unearthing this literary and cultural history could provide the means for engaging Iranian cultural archives as alternative sites for communication and translation across the political barriers.

Comparative Literature serves as a particularly apt arena for the reconsideration of Iranian literary and cultural phenomena in a global context. A reconceptualization of Persian literary history from the vantage point of Comparative Literature can offer a different history of the apparent political, religious, and cultural impasse defining contemporary Iran's relations to other nations. What I propose is not a comprehensive retelling of Persian literary history but rather snapshots of border incursions, translations, and transcultural encounters and clashes amidst attempts at safeguarding the nation from external influences. Concealed behind Iran's apparent anxiety about maintaining religious, linguistic, political, and cultural autonomy are countless fascinating examples of excursions outside the parameters of bounded linguistic and cultural identity and creative and transformative travels and return journeys. Reading Persian literature through such instances of border crossing as well as tropes of travel and

translation takes us away from the limits of national literature as well as the concept of unidirectional influence or borrowing.<sup>1</sup>

The comparative analysis I propose is informed by Edward W. Said's notion of contrapuntal reading:

this global, contrapuntal analysis should be modeled not (as earlier notions of comparative literature were) on symphony but rather on an atonal ensemble; we must take into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices – inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions – all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography. (Said, 1993: p. 318)

Because this comparative approach is attuned to resistances and discontinuities it does not insist on finding parallels and symmetries only.

A good point of entry for both the discussion of world literature and its intersections with Persian literature is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's declaration on January 31, 1827 to Eckermann:

I am more and more convinced [...] that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times in hundreds and hundreds of men [...] we Germans are very likely to fall too easily into this pedantic conceit, when we do not look beyond the narrow circle that surrounds us. I therefore like to look about me in foreign nations, and advise everyone to do the same. National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach. (Goethe, 1951: pp. 165–66)

Goethe's extensive readings in literatures of the world, particularly in Chinese literature, form the backdrop of his pronouncement, as do his concerns with claims about the uniqueness of German literature. His pronouncement is steeped in his awareness of older and other literary traditions beyond the ken of most Europeans of the time. Goethe's own travels in literature were instrumental in shaping his views on world literature. To cite François Jost, “[i]t is by no means a simple coincidence that Goethe was the one who coined the word *Weltliteratur*” (Jost, 1974: p. 14). Goethe's *West-Östlicher Divan* (*West-Eastern Divan* published in 1819) and *Chinesisch-Deutsche Jahres und Tageszeiten* (*Chinese-German Hours and Seasons* published in 1830) are examples of his conviction that the knowledge and study of other literatures can inspire new forms of literary creativity and advance critical perspectives otherwise not within the reach of a critic confined to the knowledge of one nation's literature.

In Goethe's case one of the poets whose work propelled him outside the borders of his imagination was the fourteenth-century Iranian poet known by his pen name Hafiz.<sup>2</sup> Goethe's knowledge of Hafiz's poetry was mediated through German translations. His encounter with Hafiz across barriers of time, language, religion, and cultural history was also facilitated by a need for a type of mobility that had been foreclosed because of war. It is well worth restating that the composition of poems that would later become the *Divan*, coincided with a journey that reunited Goethe

with aspects of his past.<sup>3</sup> As Katharina Mommsen points out: “In July [1814] Goethe set out for the lands of his youth which he had not seen for seventeen years because of the wars” (Goethe, 1998: p. XII). The concepts of journey, pilgrimage, and flight are central to Goethe’s collection. The opening poem of the *Divan*, entitled *Hegire*, is an allusion to the prophet Mohammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina and the moment that marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. Likening his own poetic journey eastward to a migration in search of a more hospitable site for the propagation of a new faith, Goethe invokes the Napoleonic Wars that incite his own search for a climate of peace:

North and South and West are quaking,  
Thrones are cracking, empires shaking:  
You must flee; the East will right you,  
Patriarchs’ pure air will delight you;  
There in loving, drinking, singing  
Youth from Chiser’s well is springing.<sup>4</sup>

(Goethe, 1998 [1814–1819]: p. 5)

The Orientalist vision of a timeless and unchanging East notwithstanding, Goethe’s invocation underlines the upheavals that had swept Europe and the reactions they had produced in him. His flight to the Persia of his imagination inspired him to explore how a poet in a remote time and place had coped with destruction and war. We learn from Goethe’s “Notes and Essays to improve understanding of the West-Eastern Divan,” (Goethe, 1974 [1814–1819]: pp. 125–290) that his knowledge of Persian poetry and history, while mediated through translations, was extensive enough to give him an appreciation of the devastating effects of a succession of wars that coincided with Hafiz’s own lifetime. Hafiz served as a model for a poetic meeting ground where new creations could emerge in spite of and as a result of conflict.

Goethe’s attempt to understand and emulate Hafiz is naturally inflected by his limited knowledge of Persian as well as the received knowledge about the Orient available in German at that time. It is not surprising to find Orientalist topoi both in his poems and notes on the *Divan*. The verses that serve as the epigram to the notes accompanying Goethe’s *Divan* lay bare a desire to know and to cross over into the realm of the other:

If poetry you want to understand,  
you must go to poetry’s land.  
If a poet you want to understand,  
you must go to that poet’s land.

(Goethe, 1974: p. 125)<sup>5</sup>

The word *Land* in German nicely captures both the physical and the virtual world embodied in a poet and his work. That Goethe could not traverse the temporal and geographical distances separating him from Hafiz is evident in his conjectures about Hafiz and his creation of a collection of poems which could not be viewed as either

Eastern or Western, but would occupy a liminal and potentially transformative space. Goethe's encounter with Classical Persian poetry was but one catalyst to his appreciation of the limits of national boundaries in literary production and criticism. In this sense Goethe's readings in Persian literature and history and the collection of poems they inspired were an act of translation, as described by Emily Apter: "an act of love, and [...] an act of disruption" which becomes the:

Means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of denaturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements. (Apter, 2006: p. 6)

This is the kind of self-repositioning we witness in Goethe's conversation with Eckermann and his embrace of the concept of world literature.

As they did for Goethe, real and metaphorical journeys also brought Iranians face to face with poets, writers, and intellectuals from other regions of the globe and instigated similar forms of self-reflexivity and exploration. In the pre-modern era, we find poetic migrations necessitated at least in part by political turmoil that facilitated Persian poetry's trans-regional reach.

One of the most fascinating examples of such migration is the thirteenth-century poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose name has entered contemporary North American culture through English adaptations of Coleman Barks among many others. This recent pattern of translations and adaptations, which I will not take up in this analysis, is true to the ethos of Rumi's own life and work. A cursory review of Rumi's life reveals the centrality of migration to his life and art.

He was born in 1207 in the city of Balkh, now part of modern Afghanistan, and fleeing the Mongols he traveled with his family across Persia, Iraq, Arabia and Syria, finally settling in Konya, the capital of the Turkish Seljuk Empire. He spent the remainder of his life in Konya and it is there that he achieved his fame in poetry. Given Rumi's trajectory, it is not surprising that he:

has been claimed by several countries and cultures – Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, the Arabs, and the Muslim communities of the Soviet Union – on the grounds of genealogy, birth place, language, cultural orientations, adopted country, burial place, or territory of impact [...] Yet a close scrutiny of biographical and other historical documents support few of these claims in any convincing way. The internal references found in his work show that Rumi wanted no "national" identification of "citizenship" in terms of our modern concepts and definitions. (Halman, 1998: p. 213)

Setting aside the anachronism of fitting Rumi into concepts devoid of currency in the thirteenth century, the effort to claim Rumi for any particular national literature speaks to a failure to seize on the movements, albeit rooted in devastation and war, which placed him at the crossroads of many languages and cultures. Rumi provides one of the most compelling reasons for the need to study pre-modern Persian literature

from a comparative perspective. The points of comparison, however, would not be European languages and literatures, but rather the languages, literatures, and cultures of West Asia in the early modern period. Unfortunately this type of complex literary and cultural history frequently falls prey to modern concepts of nationhood and Western models of literary periodization.

The periodization adopted in Persian literary historiography offers up a telling example in its conceptualization of the literature of the Safavid era (1501–1722) which has been viewed frequently as lacking originality and distinction.<sup>6</sup> This view is tenable only if literary production of the Safavid period is confined to territorial geography and poetry written in Persian in Muslim India is discounted. To appreciate Persian poetry of this period, we must adopt a view akin to Goethe's, and see patterns of migration across borders:

From the geographical point of view, this literature was produced in a vast stretch of land extending from Turkey to Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. In Muslim India the language of poetry was chiefly, and in the north almost exclusively, Persian. In the Turkic-speaking countries, both Turkic (namely, Turkish, Turki, and Chagatay) and Persian poetry were written, but, except for folk poetry, they were both modeled on poetry emanating from Persia. (Yarshater, 1988: pp. 249–50)

In this historical and cultural context, it is necessary to follow the movements that made the Muslim courts of India the center of Persian poetic production. What is commonly referred to as the “Indian Style” in Persian poetry came about because “India became the Mecca of poets and artists” who were richly rewarded for their work:

Their generosity reached not only the poets attached to their courts, but also many more, who, having heard of their patronage, sent them poems from various parts of India, Persian, and Transoxania. (Yarshater, 1988: p. 251)

The poetic migrations of this era capture an ethos that vanished under European colonial rule. When under British rule Persian ceased to be the official language of India, there began a new phase of history and a conceptualization of the history of the languages, literatures, and cultures of the region that set them against and found them inferior to European models of literary development. This process is part and parcel of a particular intersection of nationalist and Orientalist discourses in modern Iranian history. The historian Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi has traced the emergence of this double movement between reterritorialization and deterritorialization in modern Iranian historiography, and his findings are crucial for a re-examination of modern Persian literary history (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1986).

Tavakoli-Targhi points out that the historiography of modern Iran has been dominated by the assumption that the Persian translation of Descartes in the 1860s is the “beginning of a new age of rationality and modernity,” and following an Orientalist logic “constitutes the period prior to its own arrival as a time of decay, backwardness,

and despotism” (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001: p. 8). He also charts a “dialogic interaction with India, Europe, and the Arab-Islamic culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001: p. 135) and the creation of a

historical vista [which] sought to dissociate Iran from Islam and to contrive a counter-Arab Iranian identity. While forgetting the Arabs and purging Persian of Arabic terms, the architects of modern Iranian nationalism sought to invent cultural and linguistic affinities between Iran and Europe. (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001: p. 143)

The move between invented and forgotten histories has deeply affected the conceptualizations of Iranian history, literature, and culture.

Histories of modern Persian literature frequently speak of significant ruptures with the past and clear demarcations between the classical and the modern era. In turn, this departure from the past has been frequently celebrated as a sign of the nation’s belated arrival into modernity. For example, Jan Rypka’s discussion of Persian literature of the twentieth century opens with the assertion that modern Persian literature owes its inception to a shift from tradition to modernity. More importantly, Rypka links modernity to “knowledge of European languages and literatures, western education, with its opening up of new possibilities in technology, natural science, and the social sciences” (Rypka, 1968: p. 362). This historical framing of modern Persian literature is amply reflected in the works of the writers of the era. One of the most important figures of modern Persian prose, Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, echoes this sentiment in the preface to his collection of short stories, *Once upon a Time* (1922): “Today Iran is behind on the road of literature compared to most of the countries of the world” (Daragahi, 1984: p. 110). Jamalzadeh’s verdict, read in light of the reputation he acquired as a transformative figure in modern Persian prose fiction, and his own unique turn to writing in Persian after he had left Iran to continue his education abroad highlight the sense of belatedness and urgent need for change that permeated a generation’s view of literary production in Iran. The comparative perspective that Jamalzadeh adopted in his summation of the state of Persian literature was turned westward and his point of comparison was the European novel which he viewed as the optimal tool for attaining “literary democracy” (Daragahi, 1984: p. 110). Jamalzadeh’s critique is particularly focused on the ornate style of Persian prose he deems elitist and inaccessible to the under-educated and the illiterate. He advocates the use of a more simplified Persian which could, he argues, facilitate the education of the working people who would otherwise not have the time and leisure to study but could well become readers of novels.

The position Jamalzadeh adopts *vis-à-vis* Persian literature is a function of his own extraterritoriality. His fascination with the state of Persian literature is rooted in his journey outside Iran. If he is anxious to introduce tenets of European modernity into Persian literary practice, he is equally worried about the loss of “tradition,” particularly in the later stages of his career. In the 1955 preface to his memories of growing up in Iran, Jamalzadeh writes somewhat defensively:

It ought not be forgotten that attachment to old and indigenous manners and customs, which westerners call “tradition” is, if not among the requisites of civilization, at least counted among its prominent marks. During the long years which this author has lived in Europe, he has ever been a witness to the extent of Europeans’ attachment to their customs, manners, and traditions [...] They plant love and affection for things which are mementos of their fathers and grandfathers – and which so often provoke laughter, derision, and scorn from many of us Iranians – in the fields of the hearts and minds of their children. (Jamalzadeh, 1983: pp. 6–7)

The thirty years that separate this passage from Jamalzadeh’s assessment of the edifying potential of the novel for the Iranian population have brought out the concern about loss of “authenticity” which continues to rival the concern about Iran’s need to catch up to the European nations. As we will see, the movement between these two centers of gravity is central to the study of modern Iranian literary and cultural history. In this vexed polarity we see the extent to which modern Iranian history and culture have been shaped by discourses of Orientalism and counter-discourses of authenticity. The shuttling between these poles can be seen as leading to the “formation of schizophrenic social subjects [...] conscious of their belonging to two diverse and often antagonistic times and cultural heritages” (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001: p. 95). But the passage between the opposed and distinct concepts of history and identity has demanded becoming adept at translation, be it of the self, or of the nation. The process of constructing and positing an imagined Iran, alternatively embraced or contested, necessitated productive engagements with what was assumed to be native to Iran or was worthy of being transplanted on Iranian soil. It is in this “contact zone” between the self and the other that we encounter innovative translations and adaptations of both the native and the foreign (see Pratt, 1992: pp. 6–7).

It is not by chance that translation has played a remarkable role in Iran’s modern literature. Historians of Persian literature are quick to mark the pivotal function of translation in the emergence of a new type of literary sensibility. For example, Hasan Kamshad attributes the revival of prose writing on the eve of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1911 to the appearance of two books: A travelogue entitled *Siyabat nama-i Ibrahim Beg* (The Travel Diary of Ibrahim Beg) and the Persian translation of James Morier’s novel, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*. The former he describes as the “first attempt to write a Persian novel on the European model” and the latter as a “loose rendering” of the English novel which stands out as “one of the most successful experiments in the new trend of prose writing” (Kamshad, 1996: pp. 24, 26–7). It is worth noting that the translation of Morier’s novel is not valued for its fidelity to the original, but rather for the way it helped transform the nature of written Persian. The language of modern Persian prose writing emerged as a result of both journeys to Europe and attempts to introduce European literatures into Persian. But the process that led to the emergence of this new prose was far from static and exempt from the type of anxiety about loss of tradition we witness in Jamalzadeh’s preface to his memoirs. Not surprisingly we find in Jamalzadeh’s own works manifestations of concerns about the limits of interference with Persian.



In his short story, "Persian is Sugar," Jamalzadeh depicts the dilemma of an uneducated native of Iran, thus a person more at ease with colloquial or spoken Persian, who ends up in a prison cell with three fellow countrymen. He finds communication with two of them impossible. One of his cellmates, returning from Europe, speaks a Persian so interlaced with French words as to be incomprehensible. Another fellow prisoner, a man of the cloth, addresses him in an Arabized Persian he fails to understand. The third cellmate, who stands in for the voice of moderation, speaks a more accessible Persian and "saves" the ordinary man from panic and confusion. He is also the narrator and embodies a modern Iran that is not fearful of looking to the West and yet judicious enough not to forsake his ties to his own language and culture. We encounter this narrator "[a]fter five years of knocking about Europe and suffering" (Jamalzadeh, 1985: p. 31). Interestingly the story takes place at the traveler's point of entry, the port town of Enzeli on the Caspian Sea. This border town, a site of crossings, is a liminal space where a religious and a modernized Iranian cross paths with the narrator and the disoriented local. In this transitory space Iranian identity manifests itself as pliable and open to negotiation. Yet the difficult and jarring communication between the four Iranians occupying the same cell emphasizes the malaise accompanying the juxtaposition of four subjects. Jamalzadeh's satirical representation of modern Iranians as lost between the poles of tradition and modernity gestures at once to the changes that were sweeping the country as a result of encounters with the West and captures an underlying apprehension about preserving elements of Iranian tradition, including its Muslim identity. Living outside the borders of the country made Jamalzadeh an avid collector of Persian colloquialisms, proverbs, and sayings. His zeal for preserving linguistic and cultural traditions he felt were being abandoned in favor of a modern identity is evident in his memoirs as well as his fiction. But not all his contemporaries or successors shared his vision and passion for preserving tradition.

The drive to reinvent Iran in a modern image, as mentioned by Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, drew both on European models and a mythic, pre-Islamic Iran, believed to have been free of foreign (read as Arab and Islamic) contamination. We see this tendency in another prominent Iranian literary figure Sadeq Hedayat, who, in contrast to Jamalzadeh, viewed many aspects of Iran's Islamic legacy with a jaundiced eye.

Bozorg Alavi, one of Hedayat's contemporaries, remembers the latter's extreme views of all that had accompanied the arrival of Islam in Iran:

Hedayat would say (heatedly): Whatever the Arab has brought, whatever is of Arabic origin is defiled and corrupt. (Raffat, 1985: p. 63)<sup>7</sup>

Alavi also recalls that Hedayat would discuss European writers and share his knowledge with his peers.<sup>8</sup> Hedayat acted as a translator of European literature and urged writers like Alavi to also undertake translations of European literature into Persian. Hedayat's own translations of or essays on Iran's pre-Islamic legacy, pre-modern Persian, or of European literary texts, reveal how he continually read and interpreted

across time and place. For instance, his translation of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and his essay on Kafka appropriate what he believed to be akin to elements of Omar Khayyam's poetic vision (see Rahimieh, 1994). Hedayat's own creativity owes much to the contacts he animated between divergent moments in time, language, history, and tradition. And yet, ironically, he continued to adhere to a reductive history of Islam.

Hedayat's views on Arab culture and Islam reflect a wave of nationalism which coincided with the rise of fascism in Europe and the development of a political affinity between the ruling monarch of the time, Reza Shah Pahlavi, and Nazi Germany. The political alliances were, by some accounts, eased by the discovery of a shared "racial" legacy between Iran and Germany. Evidence to support this hypothesis was advanced by the German archeologist Ernst Herzfeld of ancient Iranian inscriptions that suggested that Iran corresponded to the ancient term, *Aryanam Khsbatbram*, the Empire of Aryans (Grigor, 2007: p. 562). In Reza Shah's nationalist and modernizing vision, this discovery warranted changing the country's name from Persia to Iran. Persia, the term used in non-Persian languages to refer to the country, did not evoke Iran's true heritage:

After the country's name change, Reza Shah's foreign ministry declared, "Iran is the birthplace of Aryans, therefore we take advantage of this name," adding, the "world's great powers esteem the Aryan race; this only points to the greatness of the race and civilization of ancient Iran." The Irano-German tie culminated with a state visit of Nazi Foreign minister Dr. Schacht to Tehran, where he informed the reformists that Hitler has excluded Iranians from the provisions of the Nuremberg race law, since Persians were now categorized as pure Aryans. (Grigor, 2007: p. 571)

The formalization of this highly problematic racial identity was meant to eradicate any form of affiliation with Islam and instead produce a secular and modern nation equal to others in Europe. Persian language and literature bear countless traces of the racist ideology underpinning the formation of a modern Iranian identity. But even this iteration of nationalism cannot be read in isolation from other engagements with European ideas that undermined this construction of a nationalist discourse devoid of references to Islam.

The generation of writers that followed Jamalzadeh, Alavi, and Hedayat, was equally invested and interested in translation. Drawing on the anti-colonial movements of their time, writers and thinkers like Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati saw a different arena for asserting Iranian identity. In his seminal and controversial treatise, *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad, a writer, essayist, and activist, attributed Iran's problems to its enslavement by the West:

I speak of being afflicted with "westitis" the way I would speak of being afflicted with cholera [...] We are dealing with a sickness, disease imported from abroad, and developed in an environment receptive to it. (Al-e Ahmad, 1982: p. 3)

Al-e Ahmad's analysis takes aim at the institutions of Orientalism and imperialism and their erosion of Iran's Islamic legacy. His invocation of an "authentic" Iran owes much to his "readings of European literature and critical intellectuals such as Camus, Ionesco, Sartre, Junger, Heidegger, Kafka, Beckett, and their critiques of Western nihilism" (Mirsepassi, 2000: p. 101). Remarkably some of the same European writers who served to buttress Hedayat's conception of a non-Islamic Iran provided the impetus for Al-e Ahmad's critique – itself "a dialogic mode of reconciling local cultures with modernity, rather than a stubborn determination to avoid modernity at all costs" (Mirsepassi, 2000: p. 96). Similar dynamics affected Ali Shariati, who followed in Al-e Ahmad's footsteps and expanded on his work.

Shariati's education in France had brought him face to face with some of the most prominent architects of decolonization. But, as his writings demonstrate, he did not see himself as a mere follower of their doctrine. Instead he identifies in the currents of European thought possible points of dialogue with Iranian trends. In the following passage, he shows himself engaged in an exchange with Fanon and successful in persuading him of the applicability of his thought to the particularities of his native Iran:

Frantz Fanon, whom I knew personally and whose books I have translated into Persian, was pessimistic about the positive contribution of religion to social movement. He had, in fact, an anti-religious attitude until I convinced him that in some societies where religion plays an important role in the culture, religion can, through its resources and psychological effects, help the enlightened person to lead his society toward the same destination toward which Fanon was taking his own through non-religious means. I added further that Fanon's anti-religious feeling stemmed from the unique religious experience of Europe in the Middle Ages and the ensuing freedom of European society in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. (Shariati, 1986: p. 19)

That in the construction of his argument Shariati could draw on Western and Shi'ite Iranian discourses highlights the extent to which he occupied a position at the crossroads of intellectual traditions (see Mirsepassi).<sup>9</sup> Shariati's exchange with Fanon is a long way away from Goethe's encounter with Hafiz, but in his attempt to persuade Fanon of the merit of his argument he too migrates out of his "comfort zone" to make Fanon's ideas accord with his own and to bring something of Fanon into his native Iranian context. This experience of translation, like others in modern Iranian history, highlights the amalgam that emerged in the various zones of contact, whether the Iranian literati saw themselves as leaning toward nativism or the wholehearted embrace of Western ideas (see Boroujerdi, 1996). The process they delineate is itself transformative, dynamically shaping and reshaping concepts of tradition and modernity. For instance, what Shariati created as a result of his translations and contacts was a uniquely modern approach to doctrines of Shi'ism. Under the banner of returning to tradition, intellectuals like Shariati and Al-e Ahmad deftly rearticulated the very conception of tradition. Their view of what constituted native Iranian tradition

diverged radically from their predecessors' and gained currency in the dominant discourses of identity in the nineteen sixties and seventies. The transformations they wrought might be polar opposites of those Hedayat brought to the Iranian cultural arena, but the very existence of these contrasting ideas of Iranian cultural legacy foregrounds vexed and contradictory conceptualizations of Iran's history and culture. The clashes and the seemingly impossible syntheses that are part and parcel of recent Iranian history have been necessary for deeper questionings of myths of collective and national identity. We find resonances of such critical interrogations in both the engagements with questions of gender and minority – issues pushed to the periphery of both in the articulation of the modern national subject and in the creation of an Islamic Republic – in contemporary Persian literature.

A particularly rich site for the examination of the intersection of gender and minority representation in contemporary Persian literature is to be found in the works of the award-winning Armenian-Iranian writer, Zoya Pirzad, who belongs to the generation of post-revolutionary writers.<sup>10</sup> She has become one of Iran's most popular writers and her novels and short stories are widely read in and outside Iran. Equally significantly Pirzad, like many of her predecessors, is also a literary translator. Most of her protagonists are women, apparently caught up in insignificant details of daily life. They contend with concerns about family, raising children, or negotiating divorces and single parenthood. If gender relations figure prominently in Pirzad's works, so does Armenian-Iranian life. Her incorporation of Armenian characters goes beyond acknowledging the presence of Armenians in Iran. They become at once part of the currents of modern Iranian history and sources of anxiety about how to maintain demarcations between the self and other.

In Pirzad's first novel, *I will Turn off the Lights*, a first-person female protagonist, Clarisse, narrates the life of an Armenian-Iranian family living in an oil company compound in the city of Abadan, in southern Iran, in the pre-revolutionary era. On the surface, this family's concerns and preoccupations are no different from their other compatriots'. While Clarisse's life revolves around her chores and taking care of her twin daughters, teenage son, and husband, like other Iranians of his class and generation, her husband, Artoush, takes part in leftist anti-government activities. All along Artoush and Clarisse's lives appear to stay within the realm of the everyday chores and concerns. Each night, just before Artoush leaves for bed, he asks Clarisse: "Will you turn off the lights?" to which she responds: "Yes, I will turn off the lights," giving their days the semblance of a well-worn routine. And yet beneath this monotony are signs of the radical differences that separate this family from other Iranians. Although the story of this family's life is narrated in Persian, the experiences that make up the novel are translated from Armenian, the primary mode of communication between the family members. Beyond language, the protagonist has an internalized sense of profound displacement:

I didn't know where to begin. I looked at the map of Iran hanging on the wall above the bed. I circled a lake with my glance, came close to read its name, and learn that it

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is called Bakhtegan. I remembered my rendezvous with Mrs. Nurelahi and thought why without having seen them I know the location of all cities on the map of Armenia but don't know the names of lakes in Iran.<sup>11</sup> (Pirzad, 2001: p. 143)

This rumination on the part of the narrator speaks to her sense of belonging to another national map, although this map itself attests to multiple crossings. Territorial and linguistic displacements remind Clarisse that she has also distanced herself from events that have been taking place in Iran. When her husband's secretary, Mrs. Nurelahi tells her about Iranian women's mobilization for equal rights, Clarisse thinks to herself:

I didn't know that the parliamentary elections were nearing, and I had heard something about women's right to vote. I thought, like all Armenians, I act as if I don't live in this country. I was embarrassed. (Pirzad, 2001: p. 110)

Clarisse also learns of Mrs. Nurelahi's participation in the commemoration of the Armenian massacre. She wonders what motivates a Muslim Iranian to take part in a ceremony conducted entirely in Armenian. Clarisse's puzzlement stems from her position as minority whose place in the Iranian national imagination has not given her reason to believe that non-Armenians would or could seek them out and would want to learn about their history. But even this representation of Armenian identity is troubled by inner discontinuities and incursions that manifest themselves at the level of the protagonist's name, a reminder of transferences and translations between Armenian and Western European languages. If Mrs. Nurelahi does not understand the speeches delivered at the commemoration ceremony, Clarisse notes the differences separating her Armenian from the variety spoken by an elderly Armenian from Van, Turkey who delivers a speech at the ceremony. These reminders of ruptures and differences undercut the possibility of reading either the Armenian or the Muslim Iranian identities as static and or monolithic.

The complex relationships between the Muslim and the Armenian-Iranian outlined in Pirzad's first novel are more fully filled out in her three interconnected stories entitled *One Day before Easter*. The three stories in this collection, "Sour Cherry Pits," "Sea Shells," and "White Violets" chart the life history of an Armenian man, Edmond, from childhood on the shores of the Caspian Sea to adulthood and middle age in Tehran.

Edmond's childhood is marked by his close friendship with Tahereh, a Muslim schoolmate, who is the daughter of the Armenian school's custodian. Edmond's family home overlooks the Armenian school and the church housed in its yard, and Tahereh and her family live on the first floor of the school building. Because Tahereh's parents look after the school, the school board is persuaded by Edmond's father to enroll Tahereh. He argues that: "He has been a custodian for many years. It will not please God to have his daughter go to a school at the other end of town because she is not Armenian" (Pirzad, 2006: p. 243). Tahereh proves to be a remarkable student and outperforms her Armenian classmates even in their own language:

I started a sentence many times and crossed it out. The opening sentence was always difficult for me. I wished Tahereh were there to help me. Tahereh's Armenian composition, like all other subjects, was better than everyone's in the class. There was not a single student in the school who had not been chided by an adult about Tahereh's performance. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself? The daughter of the Muslim custodian speaks your mother tongue better than you!" I thought how did Tahereh manage to write such compositions? Our maternal home was not hers. (Pirzad, 2006: pp. 238–39)

Tahereh is not only adept at learning Armenian; she attends church with her schoolmates and is equally devoted to learning the prayers. But her embrace of Armenian language, religion, and culture does not stop her from saying her prayers at home. When Edmond asks her how she performs her Muslim prayers while wearing a cross she has grown accustomed to having around her neck, she responds matter-of-factly that she replaces the cross with an Allah during her Muslim prayers. What Edmond learns from his Muslim friend, Tahereh, is the constructed nature of an Iranian school child's identity along vectors of ethnicity, language, and religion. She represents the possibility of thinking outside the normative positions of minority and majority. The behaviors and practices she has learned as a child growing up Muslim in an Armenian school do not limit her to choosing one or another set of beliefs. She learns to cross back and forth between embodying Muslim and Armenian identities.

The apparent ease with which Tahereh negotiates a path between her Muslim family and the Armenian community in which she has been raised is not replicated on a broader social plane. As the story reveals, a forbidden relationship of a different kind has developed between the unmarried Armenian principal of the school and Tahereh's mother. The discovery of this relationship reveals a deep anxiety on the part of the Armenians and Muslims about crossing the religious and ethnic divide. In fact, the thread running through the three short stories in this collection is the specter of relationship or marriage between an Armenian and a Muslim. In the second and third stories, Edmond's own daughter falls in love with a Muslim man at the university and finds her family members resistant to accepting their relationship. In the third and final story, Edmond learns that the single Armenian woman who works alongside him as the vice principal of the school he runs had to leave her hometown and family because of her love for a Muslim man. Her self-imposed isolation and exile stand as counter examples to Tahereh's mobility. Ironically the lessons of diversity the young children learn in the school are undermined at the level of social mores. They learn a harsh lesson about the rigid boundaries between the self and the other and the even more troubling lesson that this "otherness" is within the home and the nation.

The impossible marriage of Muslims and Armenians depicted in *One Day before Easter*, like the jarring communication between the Muslim and Armenian women in *I will Turn off the Lights*, illustrates a turning point in modern Persian literature. The

search for and difficult engagement with the other that marks modern Persian literature has enabled a different type of journey within and the discovery of the other in the space of the nation, rather than outside its borders. If the tropes of migration, mobility, and translation have always been central to Persian literary history, they have exerted special influence in the more recent chapters of that history. At the very moment when Iran's national identity is deliberately and exclusively associated with Islam, one of the most celebrated and well read national writers is an Armenian woman who depicts the nation's blindness to its own internal diversities, thereby raising probing questions about this most recent iteration of Iranian identity.

Reading Persian literature in the context of the complex movements across the globe reveals the asymmetries, contradictions, and paradoxes that underwrite many chapters of its history. The history that emerges demonstrates how incursions and multidirectional movements are the cornerstone of Persian literary heritage.

NOTES

- 1 I am indebted to Philip Grant, a PhD candidate in Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine, for his insights into the multifarious ways in which translation has affected modern Iranian cultural and intellectual discourses.
- 2 The word "Hafiz" means keeper and refers to the poet having memorized the Koran by heart, thus becoming "keeper" of the knowledge revealed in it.
- 3 The word "Divan" has many connotations, but in relation to poetry it means a collection of poetic works.
- 4 Whaley's English translation is a verse rendition that while capturing the spirit of the stanza introduces some changes worth noting. For instance, in the German original, the third line the command to flee to the East is not as evident:

Nord und West und Süd zersplittern  
 Throne besrsten, Reiche zittern  
 Flüchte du, im reinen Osten  
 Pariarchenluft zu kosten,  
 Unter Lieben, Trinken, Singen,  
 Soll dich Chisers Quell verjüngen.  
 (Goethe, 1974: p. 4)

- 5 This English translation is by George Lang. The original German reads:

Wer das Dichten will verstehen  
 Muß ins Land der Dichtung gehen;  
 Wer den Dichter will verstehen  
 Muß ins Dichters Lande gehen.  
 (Goethe, 1998: p. 27)

- 6 More recent scholarship has pursued the line of inquiry opened up by Ehsan Yarshater and challenged the narrow definitions of literary production of the Safavid era. Paul Losensky's "Poetics and Eros in Early Modern Persia" and Colin Mitchell's *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran* offer invaluable new insights into Safavid poetry and prose.
- 7 Alavi himself is a fascinating figure who received some of his education in Europe. Upon his return to Iran he became part of a literary circle to which other influential writers belonged. Along with fifty-two others he was imprisoned for being a communist, although Alavi saw himself as a mere sympathizer and participant in a reading and discussion group. Upon his release from prison, Alavi departed for East Germany and spent the remainder of his life in exile.
- 8 Bozorg Alavi reports: "I remember the discussions we had! Hedayat would talk about Stefan Zweig, and I would remark that I had read him. Then I, in turn, would talk about Thomas Mann. And then Hedayat would respond by going into – what's the title now?"

- *Die verzauberte Seele! L'Ame enchantée* (The Soul Enchanted). The story by Romain Rolland. And Hedayat would say: What, you've read that as well? And then both of us would be ecstatic" (Raffat, 1985: p. 64).
- 9 I am indebted to Mohammad Rafi, a young scholar, who will be pursuing his doctoral studies in German philosophy with a special focus on how it is has been taken up on modern Iranian intellectual movements. He has generously shared the fruit of his research with me and educated me in the transfer and transmutations of German philosophy into modern Iran.
- 10 My reading of Zoya Pirzad and other contemporary Iranian women writers has benefited immensely from discussion and dialogue with Sharareh Frouzesh Bennett, a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at University of California, Irvine.
- 11 The English translations of all citations from Pirzad's works are my own.

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