

the attention this volume brings to marginal modernists, future scholarship will illuminate the poetic innovations of those who wrote in traditional forms.

The scholarship in this volume is thorough and well-researched, with the author drawing on a wide range of sources to support his arguments. The analysis of the aesthetic, cultural, and political dimensions of the selected poets' works is particularly noteworthy. The book's focus on previously neglected experimentalists in Chapter 5 is a significant contribution to the field, as such figures have not been extensively studied previously. Similarly, the exploration of Kia and Irani in Chapter 6 adds depth to our understanding of the period's avant-garde movements. Even when the volume addresses mainstream poets, for instance in Chapter 4, it proposes novel and refreshing interpretations of poems.

Sonboldeh's writing style is generally effective, although at times dense and laden with theoretical jargon. This may be appropriate for a scholarly audience, but might limit the book's accessibility to a broader readership. Presentation of complex theoretical concepts without extensive explanation also may pose a challenge to readers not already familiar with the works of thinkers such as Rancière, Bloom, and Bürger. Providing somewhat more context and simplifying some of the language would have enhanced the book's readability without compromising its intellectual rigor. Furthermore, the volume would benefit from more rigorous proofreading, as there are a few errors that detract from the overall polish of the work. For instance, the sentence "This was the outset of a critical correspondence within which Raf'at *defended* and Bahar *denounced* the opinions of the writer of *Maktab-e Sa'di*" (italics mine; pp. 70–71). It was, in fact, Raf'at who denounced and Bahar who defended these opinions.

Despite these critiques, *The Rebellion of Forms in Modern Persian Poetry* is a crucial addition to the study of Persian poetry and modernism. The author's innovative use of Western critical theories to analyze Iranian poetry opens new avenues of understanding, although there remains a place for future scholarship to develop indigenous theoretical frameworks. This book is especially relevant for those interested in alternative poetic movements and broader global modernism. Its interdisciplinary approach also makes it valuable for readers exploring the intersection of literature and political theory. In summary, this volume offers a fresh perspective on the evolution of modern Persian poetry and is recommended to those interested in the rich and complex landscape of Persian poetic modernism.

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## Reading across Borders: Afghans, Iranians, and Literary Nationalism

**Aria Fani (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2024). Pp. 264. \$55.00 paper. ISBN: 9781477328811**

Reviewed by Mateusz M. P. Kłagisz , Department of Iranian Studies, Institute of Oriental Studies, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland ([mateusz.klagisz@uj.edu.pl](mailto:mateusz.klagisz@uj.edu.pl))

Aria Fani recently published an interesting result of several years of research on the place, role, and transition of literature in the 20th-century intellectual life of Afghans and Iranians. I was familiar with several of this scholar's articles and had the opportunity to attend one of his online lectures, in which he discussed the process of redefining the concept of *adab*



(a genre of literature, culture, education, good behavior, etc.) into *adabiyāt* (literature as a whole) within the cultural realm of Afghanistan. So I knew I was in for a delightful read, and I was not disappointed.

The phenomenon of mutual relations, including both inspiration and misunderstandings, between Afghan and Iranian intellectuals has not yet been the subject of extensive research. The 184 pages of the main text revolve, as mentioned, around the theme of transforming the traditional Iranian Muslim concept of *adab* into the modern Iranian and Afghan concept of *adabiyāt*, understood as a canon of literary works. Fani weaves a story about, inter alia, the entry of two societies—Iranian and Afghan—into the 20th century, their encounter with the global transfer of knowledge, and their mutual neighborly relations. It is not only a book about literature per se but also a book about forging new national identities, not in confrontation with the Other, represented by Western civilization, but primarily in confrontation with the neighboring Other—for Iranians, the Afghans; for Afghans, the Iranians. Fani describes the Afghan and Iranian national identities as romantic to convey a critical perspective on how local intellectuals often idealize these identities, which are still in the process of being invented: “the idea that each nation has a singular language, religion, and race that define its essence across time and space” (p. xiv). By using the term “romantic,” he implies that these identities are constructed with a sense of nostalgia and idealism that glosses over the complex and multifaceted realities of these cultures. This romanticization can obscure the political, social, and cultural diversities and tensions that actually exist, presenting instead a simplified and often glorified narrative of national identity.

The author’s research was inspired by the emotional tension evoked by the two terms “Persian” and “Dari,” which refer to one language in two close variants, or perhaps two closely related languages. Here, I agree with him as he rejects the romantic vision of linguistic unity among Persian-language speakers, a vision mainly promoted by Iranian intellectuals, and emphasizes the polymorphism of the Persian language.

*Reading across Borders* also is a sort of programmatic text, as the author concludes the book with an epilogue titled “Who Needs Literature Today?”. The title poses the same question that I sometimes ask my students. In this sense, the book serves as a justification for his vision of how literature could and should be taught, as well as discussed. And although our answers may vary, they share the same common denominator—that we need literature to live and to understand our lives. It is no surprise, then, that Iranian and Afghan intellectuals have devoted so much ink and time to deliberating on what *adabiyāt* is. In today’s times, when we witness the flattening of public discussions in which modernity primarily means technological development, such works, which speak of humanity’s past while also posing questions about its intellectual future, are invaluable.

Because this is a review, I must address the fundamental research problem. As mentioned, the book analyzes the transformations undergone by the concept of *adab* into *adabiyāt* in various contexts, both private and informal as well as official and formally institutionalized encounters between Iranian and Afghan intellectuals. To capture these transformations, Fani employs three overlapping levels of description, discussed in four consecutive chapters (the last level, the most extensively described, is presented in two separate chapters). In Chapters 1 and 2, the focus is on how Iranian and Afghan intellectuals, like Fath’ali Akhundzadeh and Mahmud Tarzi, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, shaped literature as a conceptual category, drawing from their shared heritage and Persian-language tradition in the form of *adab*. Becoming a vital component of the nascent nationalisms of the early 20th century—Iranian and Afghan—*adabiyāt*, understood as a canon of national literary works important for identity formation, emerged as a key subject in institutionalized, state-controlled schools. Simultaneously, it became an area of study at higher education institutions, such as the newly established universities in Tehran and Kabul. This incorporated the expectations put forth by the authorities of Iran and

Afghanistan, represented by the Pahlavi and Musahiban dynasties, into the redefined concept of literature. The author examines, among other things, the circles of Iranian and Afghan intellectuals who engaged in lively exchanges of ideas, seeking common elements in two distinct cultural-political discourses.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the intellectual output of some Iranian and Afghan *anjomans* (associations), public discussions carried out on the pages of the journal *Daneshkadeh* and the newspaper *Tajaddod*, and similar phenomena in Afghanistan like the informal Herat and stated-sponsored Kabul Literary Associations and the publishing activity of the *Kabul* journal. I consider an important part of this section to be the author's recognition of the asymmetry between language policies in Iran and Afghanistan. Whereas in Iran, the dominant discourse was the unification of cultural and national identity around the Persian language (and therefore Persian literature), in Afghanistan, the situation was (and still is) somewhat different, as two languages came to the forefront: Persian and Pashto. It is a pity that the author did not devote more space to the issue of top-down attempts to make Pashto the sole language in the country and to push the Persian language (in its local Afghan variant, Dari) into the background. The problem of the relationship between these two languages, and so between two different traditions, also is a source of tension today, with Iranians taking a sort of colonial position toward their close linguistic and cultural cousins, the Afghans. A solid foundation for such assumptions can be found in two travelogues: the former written by the Iranian Amir Hashemi-Moqaddam (2020), who traveled to Afghanistan, and the latter by the Afghan Mohammad Dawud Erfan (2023), who described his experiences as an Afghan living in Iran.

Fani's core thesis challenges the still prevalent academic notion that modern non-European literatures crystallized their national characters in response to developments in European literatures: "*Reading across Borders* challenges this accepted truth by demonstrating how Afghans and Iranians worked alongside one another at the intersection of the Persian literary heritage and the demands of romantic nationalism" (p. 3). In Fani's view, the intellectual and cultural development in Iran and Afghanistan, one of the tangible results of which are the two nation-states, was possible precisely because of the turn toward their own literary heritage. He does not dismiss external influences; in discussing the processes that led to the integration of Iranian and Afghan literary works into the broader global context, he relegates them from the forefront to a secondary position (p. 3). In my opinion, sometimes too secondary, as I missed a discussion on the adaptation of new genres, such as the historical novel, skillfully assimilated by representatives of the broadly understood Persian-language literatures of Iran and Afghanistan, in the overall discourse on the redefinition of *adabiyāt* and its implications.


What makes this book valuable is the well-expressed issue of the transnational nature of Persian literary heritage. The New Persian language, at an early stage of its historical development, ceased to be the language of a single ethnic group, which in turn gave its literary heritage a supraethnic character: "The Persian literary tradition had no natural homeland" (p. 2). Given this, how can we determine to whom it belongs? This is one of the questions faced by Iranian and Afghan intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century, when, as part of modernizing their homelands, they engaged in programs to transform the people living there into nations. Although Fani does not seek to answer this specific question, by examining the intellectual exchanges between various Persian-speaking individuals, institutions, and media operating in Iran and Afghanistan—both independently of power centers and in cooperation with or at their behest—he demonstrates the inadequacy of existing Eurocentric ways of thinking about this region. Where two groups lay claim to a shared heritage, conflicts are bound to arise, and these tensions or differing understandings of the issue are well captured and described by the author, not only from a historical perspective (the first half of the 20th century), but also in contemporary terms.

An integral part of the book consists of fourteen biographies of Afghan and Iranian intellectuals whose names appear throughout its pages. This is a clever technique that allows the main narrative thread to be maintained in the primary sections while simultaneously providing a broader context for the discussions within. *Reading across Borders* is a must-read for anyone interested in the intellectual life of 20th-century Iran and Afghanistan.

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## Persianate Verse and the Poetics of Eastern Internationalism

**Samuel Hodgkin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024).  
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Reviewed by Kayvan Tahmasebian , School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, SOAS, University of London, London, UK ([kt27@soas.ac.uk](mailto:kt27@soas.ac.uk))

Iranian poet Abu al-Qasim Lahuti writing panegyrics to Stalin in the classical Perso-Arabic form of *qasida*; Russian poet Anna Akhmatova composing a spontaneous *nazīra* (imitation) of a *rubāʿī* (quatrain) by medieval Persian poet Khayyam; French author André Gide receiving a Tajik robe of honor as a *šilat* (prize given to a poet) at a Soviet congress of writers; Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet and Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz at a *mushāʿira* (poetry recitation gathering) in Tashkent; Iranian film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf making visual *talmīh* (allusion) to the work of his Armenian peer, Sergei Parajanov, in his films. These are snapshots of the Persianate communist internationalism that Samuel Hodgkin delineates in his formidable book, *Persianate Verse and the Poetics of Eastern Internationalism*.

The book gives a groundbreaking account of the intertwinement of Persianate poetics and Soviet politics from the transregional revolutionary days of early 20th-century Russia, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire to the fragmentation of the Persianate zone through the Soviet state-building projects in Transcaucasia and Central Asia, the collapse of the USSR, and the post-Soviet era in Eurasia. Hodgkin explores the vast transnational, multinational, and international solidarities that leftist internationalists forged across West, Central, and South Asia and the Caucasus by incorporating classical Persianate forms and rituals that transcended national boundaries. He offers great insight into the dialectical entanglement of politics and poetics on a vast transregional scale in which Persianate poetics was used as a means of cultural diplomacy between the Soviet Union and the Third World. Hodgkin also meticulously demonstrates how the poetry published in the communist press across Iran and the Ottoman and Russian empires contributed to the modernization of Persianate poetics, which was further institutionalized through Soviet-inspired writers' unions. The book contains fascinating stories of poets who turned into bureaucrats and politicians who turned to poets to advance Soviet propaganda.

*Persianate Verse* is one of the first in a series of new monographs published by Cambridge University Press that proposes to “offer insights into new cartographies of literary production” on wider and more dynamic scales than monolingual and national literary histories. This focus

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