


Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry

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In *Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry*, Levi Thompson presents an innovative and thoughtful exploration of how modernist movements in Arabic and Persian poetry developed through transnational exchanges, challenging the Eurocentric perspectives that have long dominated discussions of global modernism. Thompson's thesis reframes the development of modernism in the Middle East by emphasizing the cross-cultural interactions between Arabic and Persian literary traditions. This approach illuminates a modernist geography that transcends Western literary influence, arguing that Arabic and Persian poets engaged in their own innovative practices while simultaneously responding to shared historical experiences of colonialism, decolonization, and postcolonial identity formation.

The book is structured around pairings of poets from the Arabic and Persian traditions, allowing Thompson to offer a comparative study revealing both connections and differences. In Part I, "Crafting a Modernist Geography Across Arabic and Persian Poetry," Thompson examines the works of Louis Awad and Nima Yushij. Part II, "Imagining New Worlds," focuses on Ahmad Shamlu and Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, while Part III, "Aftermath: Modernist Ends in Arabic and Persian Poetry," analyzes 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati and Furugh Farrukhzad. Through these pairings, Thompson demonstrates how modernist poets in both traditions grappled with the tension between preserving classical forms and embracing formal innovation as they engaged with political and social critiques within their cultural contexts.

A central strength of Thompson's work lies in his meticulous analysis of metrical innovation, which he sees as a crucial feature of modernism in both Arabic and Persian poetry. He argues that both Arabic and Persian modernist poets broke with the rigid metrical structures of classical poetry while maintaining a connection to the prosodic traditions of their respective literatures. This formal experimentation, Thompson suggests, parallels the poets' engagement with the concept of *littérature engagée*, linking formal progress with the capacity of poetry to address pressing political and social issues. His analysis of *shi 'r-i naw* and *al-shi 'r al-ḥurr* highlights how both poetic styles employed free verse to challenge established literary conventions and convey the complexities of post-colonial identity alongside disillusionment with modern politics.

While Thompson's formal analysis is thorough and compelling, some issues arise around the methodology employed throughout the book. One of the main limitations is the relative lack of attention given to the linguistic interactions between Arabic and Persian poets. Although Thompson convincingly argues for a shared modernist geography between these two traditions, he does not fully explore how translation or linguistic exchange facilitated this interaction. In the case of al-Bayati's engagement with Persian poetry, for instance, Thompson highlights the intertextual relationship but could have further investigated the role translation played in shaping these cross-cultural dialogues. The introduction makes a strong case for the importance of lateral transactions between Arab and Iranian poets, but the book stops short of providing concrete evidence of the mechanisms by which these interactions occurred. Without a deeper exploration of the role of language, the reader is left wondering how extensively these poets were able to influence one another in practice, given the linguistic divide.

While Thompson highlights the innovative potential of free verse in Arabic and Persian modernist poetry, his analysis could have also benefited from a deeper exploration of the structural dynamics of rhythm within these new poetic forms. Although he addresses the shift from classical forms to free verse, a more detailed examination of how prosodic systems evolved in these modernist traditions would have enriched the discussion. A brief overview of earlier prosodic innovations, before the emergence of leading modernist movements, could have been particularly helpful. For example, poets such as Muhammad Muqaddam and Abulqasim Lahuti experimented with classical meters to create freer poetic forms and rhythmic systems before Nima Yushij's breakthroughs. Even earlier, in the 19th century, poets such as Yaghma Jandaqi made inconsistent yet noteworthy attempts to break from traditional prosody. Given the significance of metrical experimentation in modernist poetry, further analysis of how poets navigated and reimagined rhyme schemes would have provided additional insight into the broader formal shifts occurring in both Arabic and Persian traditions.

Thompson's attention to the political contexts surrounding modernist poetry is another strength of the book. His discussion of the leftist politics that influenced poets such as Shamlu and al-Sayyab, for example, is particularly illuminating. He skillfully situates their poetic innovations within the broader social and political movements that shaped their era. However, despite this insightful treatment of politics in relation to modernist poetry, Thompson could have done more to explore how these political concerns shaped poets' formal choices. While the book effectively links political movements to thematic concerns and connects formal changes with poetry's capacity to address sociopolitical issues, this analysis could have been further enhanced by an examination of how poets' ideological commitments shaped their choices in experimenting with specific formal aspects of a poem. For instance, how did poets' engagement with leftist or nationalist movements influence their experiments with free verse? How did their political disillusionment affect their approach to prosodic innovation? A more thorough exploration of these questions would have provided a fuller understanding of the complex relationship between form and politics in Arabic and Persian modernist poetry.

In terms of gender dynamics, Thompson's inclusion of Furugh Farrukhzad is a valuable contribution to the study of modernism in Persian poetry. As the only prominent woman poet discussed in the book, Farrukhzad's work demonstrates how modernist experimentation intersected with issues of gender, personal freedom, and societal expectations. Thompson highlights how Farrukhzad pushed prosodic boundaries to their "farthest limits," illustrating her significant role in shaping Persian modernism. To highlight the significant questions regarding the gendered nature of modernist innovation in both Arabic and Persian contexts, the book could have broadened its scope by including additional female poets, such as Tahirah Saffaradah and Simin Bihbahani. This inclusion would have complemented the study of Farrukhzad's work, as these poets also navigated the same political and social landscapes while simultaneously challenging the patriarchal structures embedded within their literary traditions.


In the book's conclusion, Thompson emphasizes the need for a transnational paradigm of analysis that moves beyond the traditional focus on Western literary centers. He argues convincingly for the importance of "East-East" comparisons, where Arabic and Persian modernist traditions are read in dialogue with one another, rather than in relation to Western modernism. This reframing allows Thompson to challenge the dominant narrative of modernism as a Eurocentric movement, illustrating how Arabic and Persian poets forged their own modernist paths. His insistence on moving beyond the simplistic model of Western influence opens new avenues for comparative research, particularly regarding the intersections of modernism with regional, premodern poetic forms in both literary traditions.

Ultimately, *Reorienting Modernism in Arabic and Persian Poetry* makes a significant contribution to the field of Middle Eastern literary studies. Thompson's interdisciplinary approach, which combines literary analysis, political history, and cultural theory, offers a nuanced understanding of modernist poetry's development in the Arabic and Persian traditions. His work aligns with ongoing efforts to decolonize comparative literature and expand the scope of global modernism beyond its traditional Eurocentric boundaries.

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Ways of Seeking: The Arabic Novel and the Poetics of Investigation

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In July 1997, a conference held in Beirut to honor Edward Said gathered a constellation of star public intellectuals from throughout the world. During a Q&A with Tariq Ali, someone took the floor to ask, "Why all the warmed-over Marxism?" Just like that. The ensuing hush in the now-defunct Beirut Theater lasted but an instant before Ali excoriated the privileged, white "thirty-something." Then, after a couple of jibes from Ali supporters, an already frail Eqbal Ahmad took the microphone and addressed the question seriously, giving a firm but gentle defense of Marxist method as the best available way of thinking about social justice within a materialist frame of reference.

Emily Drumsta's *Ways of Seeking* is evocative of this moment in two ways. Her analysis of Marxist critique as deployed in novels by Sonallah Ibrahim strikes one as exemplary of Ahmad's best available way of thinking about social justice. Second, her analyses of eight other Arab authors' novels of the 20th century goes further, making the historical materialist approach indeed look "warmed over" as she seeks to "construct an alternative, anticolonial history of knowledge in the modern Arab world" (p. 10). In the process, she rejects a container-contained model of knowledge and develops a seeker-seeking construct.

The book's thematic ambitiousness is balanced by its methodological humility. This jargon-free work of comparative literature deftly deploys aspects of numerous thinkers' work without fanfare: Bakhtin, Horkheimer and Adorno, Foucault, Judith Butler, Timothy Mitchell, and Samera Esmeir. It demonstrates a subtle grasp of French, and its command of idioms and regional usages in Arabic clarifies otherwise cryptic passages in the novels. Its close readings trace relevant etymologies, identifying rhetorical techniques, and wielding narratological tools, all in an effort to unpack ironies and reveal striking comparisons as the author "trawls for the remains of nonhegemonic forms of knowledge scattered within Arabic novels" (p. 10). The priority placed on literary method also allows Drumsta to rock the boat of 20th-century Arabic literary history. By choosing novels from different periods with similar literary structures and "continuity of purpose," she makes the largely successful argument that critics tend to overemphasize the role of political dates such as 1948 and 1967 in triggering aesthetic rupture.