

Aria Fani, *Reading across Borders: Afghans, Iranians, and Literary Nationalism, Connected Histories of the Middle East and the Global South* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2024). Pp. 264. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781477328811.

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(Received 4 September 2024; accepted 5 September 2024)

I read this book amid heightened tension between Afghans and Iranians. Social media is abuzz with resonant anti-migration campaigns from the Iranian side, countered by strong anti-racism calls from the Afghan front. Reports of crime, rape, kidnapping, and concerns over Afghan overpopulation—due to both legal and illegal immigration—have fuelled Afghanophobia in Iran. This has resulted in daily mass expulsions of Afghans from Iran, with demonstrations in Tehran supporting these expulsions, and hashtags like “Afghan expulsion is a national demand” trending by Iranian users on social media.

The recent Iranian presidential election was the first to see anti-migration and Afghanophobia become central to candidates’ platforms, with concerns about the Afghan population’s influence on the election results being portrayed as a serious threat to national sovereignty and security. Today, the issue of Afghans is more closely tied to Iranian nationalism than at any other time in recent memory or modern Iranian history. It is in this charged atmosphere that Aria Fani’s timely book, *Reading across the Borders*, takes on added value.

Reading across the Borders offers a ground-breaking narrative on the development of Iranian and Afghan literary nationalism with the focus on cross-border cultural exchanges that shaped a shared Persian geopoetics. Published by the University of Texas Press as part of its “Connected Histories of the Middle East and Global South” series, the book examines the emergence of modern concepts of nationhood and literature, alongside the institutionalization of Persian literary history in Iran and Afghanistan during the early twentieth century. The book documents how these processes occurred simultaneously, interconnectedly, and competitively between the two nations.

This parallelism and connection are vividly reflected in the book’s cover image, which features a mirrored, semi-calligraphic rendering of the word for literature in modern Persian, *adabiyat*. The two *adabiyats* share the diacritical dots of the final letter, *ā*, symbolizing both the separation and the interconnectedness of two nationally institutionalized literatures that stemmed from the same *adab* tradition.

The introduction offers valuable insights into the interconnected histories of Iran and Afghanistan. It provides an overview of the governments’ centralizing language policies and a critique of nation-state-oriented historiographies of Persian literature. This overview guides the reader through the history of Persian modernism, which Fani presents as a transformation from a classical, multilingual, and polycentric tradition (*adab*) to a modern, monolingual, and territorially centralized institution (*adabiyat*). In this narrative, the institutionalization of literature as a modern concept disrupted the aesthetic-ethical unity inherent to *adab*. The author’s perspective on Persian modernity is innovative, particularly in its multilingual and multinational approach to this transformative transition. However,

¹ This work was produced within the framework of GlobalLIT (Global Literary Theory), supported by European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under ERC-2017-STG Grant Agreement No 759346.

the historical necessity of this transition, which the author primarily attributes to nationalizing forces influenced by European romanticism, and the association of *adabiyat* with monolingualism warrant critical examination in his analysis.

The work is guided by two distinct lines of research: the intertwining of literary nationalism projects in Iran and Afghanistan, and the transformation of *adab* to *adabiyat* at the core of these projects. In his account of an endogenous modernization of Persian literature, the author deliberately keeps Europe in the background, focusing instead on what he terms an “East-East comparison.”

The book is organized into six chapters, framed by a prologue and an epilogue that highlight the author’s personal connection to his topic. The Prologue recounts Fani’s experience of the bifurcation of Persian into the nationalized designations of Farsi and Dari, particularly through debates surrounding the separation of Iranian and Afghan services at the BBC. The Epilogue reflects his concerns as an instructor of Persian literature in the American academy, emphasizing how he believes the classical *adab* heritage, with its fusion of ethics and aesthetics, remains relevant to a broader audience in modern times.

The overall argument can be summarized as follows: Chapter 1 explores the transformation of classical *adab* into the modern category of *adabiyat*. Chapter 2 examines the connections and exchanges between Iran and Afghanistan that facilitated this transition. Chapter 3 discusses the institutionalization of the modern concept of literature in Iran in the first half of the twentieth century, with the focus on Daneshkadeh literary association (*anjoman*) and its eponymous journal. Chapter 4 addresses the parallel process of literary institutionalization in Afghanistan, focusing on the role of the Kabul Literary Association and its journal, *Kabol, Encyclopaedia Aryana*, and the University of Kabul’s Faculty of Letters. Fani concludes by illustrating how contemporary Afghan and Iranian writers are engaging with their historical backgrounds to discover new areas of mutual understanding. Through the analysis of two twenty-first-century travelogues from Iran and Afghanistan, he demonstrates the ongoing shaping of national identity through interactions and dialogues.

Fani’s study of the realignment of literature in Iran and Afghanistan within a nationalist framework is enriched by a careful analysis of the agents driving this change: individuals, institutions, and mediums. The analysis aligns well with the deep-rooted connection between the modern institution of *adabiyat* and the premodern practices of *adab*. Thus, while literati-bureaucrats such as Forughī, Bahar, and Tarzi were deeply immersed in the classical madrasa training in Persian literary sciences, modern national schools, faculties of letters, and literary associations represented metamorphoses of earlier forms of literary sociability, such as *mushaeras*. Similarly, newly established mediums like newspapers and journals used classical forms, such as *tazkiras*, to construct literary history.

The author’s novel approach, which places Europe and translation in the background while exploring the modern nationalization and conceptualization of literature across the borders, challenges readers with complex yet stimulating questions. These include whether the interactions between the two nations’ scholars, institutions, and media had a more profound impact on the transformation of literary discourse than the importation of modern concepts like nationhood and literature from Europe. Furthermore, considering the inclusion of the third component in this nationalization of Persian literature—that is, Tajikistan—could significantly enrich the direction and scope of the research, especially when taking into account the nation’s involvement with script-change initiatives and Soviet propaganda. Interestingly, while Iranians and Afghans were working on Persian as the language of their nationalism, the Soviet agenda in Central Asia employed Persian as a language of internationalism, as Samuel Hodgkin demonstrates in his recently published *Persianate Verse and the Poetics of Eastern Internationalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

Persian modernism has often been viewed through the paradigmatic bifurcation of either radical revolution or gradual evolution, a distinction the author discusses within the classical context of the famous debate between Taqī Rafat and Mohammad-Taqī Bahar. Instead of

relying on Eurocentric translational theories of modern renovation, the author focuses on the transregional intra-Persianate dialogues that sparked the renewal of practices and ideas foundational to the modern concept of literature. This approach, which emphasizes the endogenous capacities of a culture for self-transformation, has been present since the beginning of Persian modernism, serving as a response to the traditionalist critiques that label modernism as merely a European import or influence.

The book considers the cultural exchange between nations that not only share a language and literature but also, in many ways, historical fates shaped by colonial and imperialist influences, as well as the widespread migrations that have given the Persian language a migratory existence in our time, perhaps more extensively than at any other point in history.

The author takes significant steps toward what he calls a “non-Iranian contribution to a shared transnational Persian literary culture,” while also unpacking the complexities of literary nationalism. Fani carefully considers the transnational and global forces driving literary nationalism and develops alternative approaches to literary and cultural analysis that transcend the constraints of the nation-state.

The book is rich with stories of how Iranian and Afghans scholars, poets, and writers projected their national imaginaries onto the Persian language, highlighting both collaboration and competition during the nationalist cultural and political projects of Pahlavi and Mosaheban eras. The book introduces us to the pioneering journals and associations that contributed to the nationalization of *adab* in Iran and Afghanistan, as well as the cross-citations and correspondences that played a key role in this transformation. For instance, the important correspondence between Mahmud Afshar and members of the Kabul Literary Association concerning the local and translocal homelands of Persian prompts reflections on how this intercultural dialogue may have evolved under the Islamic state of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic in Iran, where religious rivalry and mutual exclusion have overshadowed national identity.

In *Reading across the Borders*, Fani investigates underexplored aspects of a transitional period in the history of Persian literature. He provides detailed close readings of visuals in Afghan magazines, revealing their significance in constructing national imaginaries, and draws our attention to the national politics surrounding almanacs in Afghanistan and Iran. The reader is introduced to a world of intellectual complementarity, where Afghan scholars engage with Bahar’s *Sabkshenasi* and critically surpass it by introducing “in-between styles,” thereby contributing to an understanding of style (*sabk*) as a flexible, descriptive category in Persian prose and poetry.

In a culturally considerate gesture, Fani consistently gives precedence to Afghans when mentioning the two nations in conjunction, as reflected in the book’s subtitle, *Afghans, Iranians, and Literary Nationalism*. However, as might be expected given the author’s nationality and expertise, the exploration of Iranian literary nationalism receives more detailed attention. This emphasis on the Iranian side of the discussion is also reflected in this review due to my own nationality and expertise, as well as the venue in which the review appears, *Iranian Studies*. We should hope that Afghan readers and reviewers will further engage with this important research.

doi:10.1017/irn.2024.47