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The Routledge Handbook of Persian Literary Translation

Edited by Pouneh Shabani-Jadidi,
Patricia J. Higgins and Michelle Quay

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What Does Translation Mean in the Age of Colonial Modernity?

Aria Fani

No one is born a native reader.

—Rebecca Walkowitz

How does the meaning of translation change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an era marked by emerging and intersecting nationalisms? Given the expansive scope of this inquiry, this chapter will be more illustrative than exhaustive, seeking to chart a new avenue of research in the fields of Persian and translation studies. By now, it is uncontroversial to state that translation played a central role in the making of modernity in all its ideological, sociopolitical, and formal iterations in Persian-speaking societies (Meisami 1991; Karimi-Hakkak 1995; Tavakoli-Targhi 2001; Rastegar 2007; Marashi 2008; Haddadian-Moghaddam 2014; Azarang 2017; Odabaei 2018; Hodgkin 2018). The vast majority of existing studies have focused on analyzing how Persian-language writers and poets have engaged and appropriated different textual discourses, primarily (but not exclusively) western European, through translation. These studies show that translation as a social enterprise has produced vastly diverse outcomes in different places and historical moments.

We still know very little about how the meaning of translation changed in the period between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth century. What valences did the term “*tarjumah*” accrue and jettison? What is the cost of accepting the English term “translation” as a self-evident and singular equivalent for *tarjumah*? This chapter addresses the need to more carefully define and understand *tarjumah* not in its bounded modern definition, but as a concept and practice that was embedded in a larger discourse of ideas, one that became reified at a particular moment in time. One way to access *tarjumah*’s obscured genealogy is by revisiting Persian-language periodicals that proliferated in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Iran, Afghanistan, and their diasporas. Such analysis would shed a critical light on both *tarjumah* and periodicals; the former would emerge as a historically grounded, culture-specific, and context-dependent concept while the latter would no longer be seen as static texts to be mined for data (Talattof 2015) and instead would be framed as a major site for cultural conversations that yielded lasting outcomes.

I contend that the concept of *tarjumah* is inseparable from an interlinked network of concepts such as nation, history, civilization, language, literature, homeland, and others that underwent consequential conceptual realignments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; that is, in the wake of colonial modernity. For instance, the term “*tārīkh*” came to signify history, marked by a positivist methodology that produced mythologized narratives about unitary peoples—Turk, Arab, or Iranian—framed as racialized heirs to distinctive civilizations (Vejdani 2015). The idea of civilization, which once denoted civility in contradistinction to barbarity, began in the 1930s to invoke a global assemblage of civilizations, each characterized by its “own” history and literature (Marashi 2020; Mufti 2016). Similarly, the term “*adabiyāt*” became a singular appellation for literature and a proprietary byword for civilizational achievement and cultural singularity (Fani 2020). These conceptual realignments were byproducts of epistemological changes brought about by colonial modernity.

The rise of literature as a notion in the nineteenth century was itself entangled with the formation of philology and its epistemic assumptions about textuality in relation to linguistic and ethnic difference (Ahmed 2018). The idea of *tarjumah* was shaped and takes shape within this node of concepts. Examining *tarjumah* without showing how it is formed in connection with this conceptual network renders it a standalone and timeless discourse. Doing so obscures how translation participated in the making of ontological nationalism, a discourse built on the hierarchized model of intrinsically constituted ethnic and linguistic difference that formed the basis of nation-states’ claims to cultural and political cohesion. Creating robust alternatives to this inherently intolerant model begins with the task of reimagining and rebuilding the cultural systems embedded within ontological nationalism. This chapter seeks to offer some cues as to how such a reimagining might be done.

The conceptual realignment of *tarjumah* left in its wake a great deal of debris in the form of valences that were reconfigured, muted, or displaced in historical processes. Put simply, past meanings lingered on. For instance, translating the term “*adabiyāt*” as literature reveals its bounded definition today, but also obfuscates its discursive ties to *adab*, a connection that will help us more critically outline the project of Persian-language intellectuals who created a new discourse of literature in the early twentieth century (Fani 2019). Another example is the term “translation,” via the Latin *transferre* meaning to bring/carry over, which has an oft-used metaphorical usage in English divorced from its basic meaning of transferring a text from one language into another (e.g., translate words into action). This metaphorical usage does not exist in the Perso-Arabic *tarjumah*. Meanwhile, *tarjumah*, as will be examined later, accommodated meanings such as biography and interpretation that the term “translation” did not necessarily contain. We need to continue investigating the conceptual history and import of these terms and to think critically about the cultural costs of their current translation. Highlighting the fact that these conceptual categories only *pose* as bounded, free-standing, timeless, universal, and substitutable across languages is crucial to understanding and ultimately challenging some of the unwelcome anxieties, obsessions, and assumptions that they have generated.

Translation and the Reification of *Adabiyāt*

The celebratory idea that translation brings different cultures closer together has become a truism today. But a more effective way to celebrate translation as a historical mechanism of intercultural exchange and a form of meaning making is to historicize it by asking such pointed questions as: what does translation mean to those involved in its process, and how does it frame the cultural context in which they operate? What are the discourses that define cultural

difference? And where is this “together” as an imagined meeting place of two literary traditions? Addressing such questions will be vital in the creation of a more positive, generative, and collaborative translation culture that can go beyond colonially and nationally manufactured ideas of linguistic and cultural difference (Booth 2019). A similar critique has been posed to comparative literature as a discipline, interrogating how colonial paradigms of comparison have produced western European selves and racialized others (Mignolo 2013). This section examines different instances of the many uses of translation in the service of producing national distinction found in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Persian-language periodicals. It first explains the significance of periodicals and then examines different instances of the many uses of translation in the service of producing national distinction.

Thanks to the advancement of print technologies, there proliferated a staggering number of periodicals in Persian in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Iran, Afghanistan, and their diasporas. Persian-language periodicals have been mined to answer varied but targeted questions about the Constitutional Revolution in Iran (Nabavi 2005), the formation of Iranian neoclassicism (Marashi 2020), the rise of literary modernism (Karimi-Hakkak 1995), the emergence of nationalism in Afghanistan (Schinasi 1979), and other focused topics. Yet, we still lack a broader conceptual framework regarding their role in bringing about cultural transformations that are today attributed to modernity. Framing language as an identitarian element in the service of nation building is one such transformation. Elsewhere, I argued that the idea of a literary ecosystem may serve as such a framework (Fani 2020). Simply put, these periodicals created a cultural context for the import, co-option, and application of the node of concepts mentioned in relation to *tarjumah*: history, civilization, language, literature, homeland, and many others.

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Persian-language periodicals had a decidedly global disposition. They were printed across urban centers from New York to Calcutta; they were distributed and read widely; they frequently commented on, reprinted, and translated articles that were featured in other periodicals; and some were even bi- or multilingual (Persian-French, Persian-Arabic, etc.). Each periodical had a unique national and local purview, while still displaying a critical awareness of its place in a broader ecosystem. For instance, in the early 1920s, the periodical *Dabistān*, published in Mashhad, featured two subscription prices, one for locals and one for the “entire Persian-speaking domain” (*tamāmat-i qalamrū-i zabān-i fārsi*). This small example indicates that the emerging discourse of nationalism produced strictly territorial and ecumenical rhetoric at once (Green and Arbabzadah 2013). In fact, the operation of territorial nationalism relied on the capacity to differentiate among local, national, and transnational conceptions of place.

The rise of literature as a conceptual category is one of the most salient features of modernity (Allan 2016). It is in the pages of periodicals that the modern notion of literature found its clearest expression. For instance, in 1902, this definition appeared on the first page of *Tarbiyat*'s 248th issue (Tehran 1896–1907), written either by Muhammad Husayn Furughi (d. 1907) or his son Muhammad 'Ali Furughi (d. 1942): “*Adabiyāt* is the term by which the poetry and prose of a language are identified today, and each nation (*millat*) in the world is recognized by the literature [*adabiyāt*] of that nation.” Writing in *Sirāj al-akhbār* (Kabul 1911–18), Mahmud Tarzi (d. 1933) wrote, “Every people is alive through its language, and every language through its literature” (Tarzi and Ravan 1977, 632). Various articulations of the same concept became pervasive in the periodicals of this period, creating a cultural context in which *adabiyāt* was transformed from a novel and context-dependent idea that traveled to Persian via translation into an institution in the course of a century between the 1860s and 1960s.

The task of reifying *adabiyāt* as a defining element of a distinctive civilization would have been unimaginable without translation. For example, in 1918, the journal *Dānishkadah* (Tehran 1918–19) featured a series of essays written by 'Abbas Iqbal-Ashtiyani (d. 1956) titled “*Tārīkh-i adabī*” (Literary history). Iqbal-Ashtiyani's column was one of the earlier positivist accounts of Persian literary history in Iran. In his inaugural essay, Iqbal-Ashtiyani offered two different meanings of *adabiyāt*: first, he referenced the way it was used by the “predecessors/classics” (*bih iṣṭilāh-i qudamā*) as a form of ethical conduct gained through the knowledge of prose and poetry, and second, the way it was invoked by Europeans (*bih iṣṭilāh-i urūpāiyān*) which, in addition to the knowledge of prose and poetry, included the possession of a “critical spirit” (*rūh-i intiqādī*) (1918, Vol. 1, no. 1: 9). Next to this key phrase, Iqbal-Ashtiyani wrote in parentheses the French term “*revue*” (review/periodical) in the Latin script. He offered no explanation for this usage and its translation. Iqbal-Ashtiyani, like many of his cohort, recognized that periodicals constituted an emerging site within which a new discourse of literature was taking form.

Including European terms within Persian-language texts became common in this period. In 1931, Mir Ghulam Muhammad Ghubar (d. 1978) wrote an essay in the first issue of the journal *Kābul* (1931–79) titled “*Adabiyāt dar Afghānistān*” (Literature in Afghanistan) in which he used the term “literature,” in the Latin alphabet, next to the phrase “*ilm-i adabī*” (1931, Vol. 1, no. 1: 12). Both Iqbal-Ashtiyani and Ghubar strategically deployed translation as a way of reconfiguring the context and meaning of *adabiyāt*, which in its premodern iteration designated sciences that pertained to *adab* as proper form and ethical conduct. Simply put, the authors here asked readers to read a familiar word (*adabiyāt*) and understand it in a new way through French literary culture. It is important to note that “*revue*” would not be translated as “critical spirit,” while the phrase “*ilm-i adabī*” would be translated more precisely as “literary science,” and not “literature.” But these “mistranslations” are particularly illuminating in that they illustrate the generative force of conceptual misalignment and the unsettled nature of *adabiyāt* as a concept whose meaning became automatized and culturally cemented only in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Let us consider another example. In 1918, *Dānishkadah* issued an *iqtirāḥ* or a test of poetic talent in its first issue. The competition called on poets to produce versified versions of a French aphorism that had been featured in prose translation below the text of the *iqtirāḥ*. The magazine explained the stakes of the literary competition as follows: Iranians already know their great poets and writers, but it is also important to learn about the writers and poets of other nations. To better understand *Dānishkadah*'s main aim here, this assertion should actually be reversed: in order for Persian-language readers to learn *how* they should regard Iranian poets and writers, they should see how European nations regard theirs. *Dānishkadah* included a series called *buzurgān* or “the greats” that featured biographies of Persian-language poets framed as national figures. The production of national distinction is a connective tissue that binds most if not all periodicals in this period. The juxtaposition of nationally framed biographies of Persian-language poets with the broader cosmopolitanism of the journal was the desideratum of world literature as a modern concept. In other words, the world of world literature in the twentieth century was one of stratified nation-states and their civilizational pedigree. It is important to note that early articulations of world literature as a notion still relied on biographization, a premodern series of genres that had flourished in the Persian tradition in virtually every historical period. This chapter will later examine the connection between biographies and *tarjumah*.

Dānishkadah featured two serialized essays that appeared under the titles “*Inqilāb-i adabī*” (Literary revolution) and “*Tārīkh-i adabī*” (Literary history), written respectively by Rashid

Yasami (d. 1951) and 'Abbas Iqbal-Ashtiyani (d. 1956). Yasami's column provided readers with an account of French literary history, presumably adapted and translated from French-language literary textbooks used for secondary education. Yasami's column on French literature complemented and facilitated the reception of Iqbal-Ashtiyani's series by making visible the need for a narrative of Persian literary history, invented in the mold of western European nationalist literary historiography. At that time, no Persian literary history in its positivist and national sense existed in Persian. As mentioned earlier, translation helped to create cultural parallels that provided literary intellectuals with a roadmap to bring concepts such as *adabiyāt* into closer alignment with late nineteenth-century western European understandings of literature. In this case, the parallelism created by Yasami was powerfully clear: any nation that aspires to be considered civilized must have a literary history that chronicles how its literature was enshrined by its people against other cultures.

Through that process, translation became burdened with anxieties of influence and originality, informed by the monolingual ethos of romantic nationalism. Iqbal-Ashtiyani's "*Tārīkh-i adabī*" demonstrates this point. He framed the establishment of Arabic as the main language of scientific production and cultural importance between the seventh and tenth centuries in Iran as a period of "subjugation" (*Dānishkadah* 1918, Vol. 1, no. 6: 361). For Iqbal-Ashtiyani, the fall of the Sassanians to Arab Muslims marked the subjugation of a "civilized nation" (*millat-i mutimaddin*) to a "primitive tribe" (*qawm-i badavī*) who set out to erase their cultural heritage. He argued that Iranians were silent for two centuries because they could not write in their "own script" (*khatt-i khud*) or speak in the "Iranian language" (*zabān-i īrānī*) (292). Even though he had designated this period as one of literary decline, Iqbal-Ashtiyani still recounted the fact that Middle Persian literary lore and knowledge was translated into Arabic, deeply enriching that literary tradition. The ethos of cultural singularity, ascendant in this period, is hardly subtle in Iqbal-Ashtiyani's assertion: it is only in Persian that Iranians can convey their thoughts. When literature is posited as an expression of ethno-nationalist essence, translation is conceived as a vessel for an unmediated transmission of knowledge, a nugget passed down from one distinctive civilization to another.

What do these examples demonstrate about the shifting meaning of translation in this period? *Tarjumah* came to exclusively mean translation from one language into another in a world where language had been transformed into an integral element of national and ethnic identity. In this world, *being* mattered more than *becoming*, roots outweighed routes. Before and after the advent of colonial modernity, people had acquired Persian as a language of learning and cultural production. The aesthetic norms and sensibilities that they had cultivated over many centuries were not considered native to a singular culture or territory (Kia 2020). Ontological nationalism disturbed this world and created one of native homelands, mother tongues, and cultural singularity. It is unsurprising that in this modern context, the mediation that lies at the heart of translation was conceived in terms of loss. The framing of translation as loss can be in part attributed to the fact that in the wake of colonial modernity languages have assumed a symbolic function, framed as an index of a unitary people's historical identity and eroticized as an element of national individuality (Hodgkin 2018, Jabbari 2017; Özdemir 2022). In that vein, loss as a Romantic concept itself begins to serve a symbolic function, performing untranslatability for sites of power, be they sacred (e.g., the Bible) or secular (e.g., the empire or the nation-state) (Baer 2020).

Another outcome of this period is a heightened awareness toward translation as a mechanism of intercultural exchange and knowledge production. For example, in an article called "*Ahamiyat-i tarjumah*" (The importance of translation) in *Kābul* (1931, no. 4), Ahmad 'Ali Khan Durrani attributed the progress of Europe, which he called the source of knowledge and the center of

innovation, to careful study and translation of "our ancestors' ideas" (*afkār-i mutiqadimin-i mā*) (Durrani 1931, 31), a reference primarily to Greco-Arabic knowledge. Durrani then commented on the names of nineteenth-century European translators who had translated Near Eastern texts into various European languages. Each name was footnoted in the Latin alphabet for reference. He praised nineteenth-century figures like Anquetil-Duperron (d. 1805) and Goethe (d. 1832) for their engagement with Eastern knowledge. Ahmad 'Ali Khan called on Persian-language translators to undertake the translation of *'ulūm-i jadīdah* or "modern sciences" (Durrani 1931, 40). He asserted that such an undertaking would help import a needed scientific lexicon lacking in Persian, and he pointed to efforts in addressing this lexical impoverishment in Arabic, Urdu, and Iranian Persian as sources of inspiration (Durrani 1931, 43).

Ahmad 'Ali Khan's article had a clear message for its readers: borrowing the scientific progress of Europe through translation should not cause feelings of inferiority because Europeans had acquired this knowledge from the East in the first place. It is important to note that Ahmad 'Ali Khan wrote this article in his capacity as vice president of the Kabul Literary Association, a society tasked by Muhammad Nadir Shah with producing and promoting a national and literary history for Afghanistan. *Anjumans* or associations had proliferated in both Iran and Afghanistan in the early twentieth century and had become important sites for cultural production. One of the main tasks of these associations was to translate materials that dovetailed well with their literary and national agendas. In fact, many of the members of the Kabul Literary Association had previously worked in Shah Amanullah's translation bureau. This framing of translation as an unmediated form of knowledge transmission was caused primarily by the rise of ontological nationalisms that sided with fixed, intrinsic identities rather than historically constituted ones.

In an era where language academies and literary associations were founded to affix languages to a national imaginary, rid them of words flagged as foreign, and place them within a discourse of literary history often marked by an obsession with monolingualism and pure origins, it is unsurprising that there formed a heightened awareness toward translation. It is in this historical process that *tarjumah* became reified as translation, signifying a pure contact between two ontological entities. Viewing translation in this light runs the risk of framing mediation altogether as corrupting and its varied outcomes as derivative. There are other ways of understanding the term, however. *Tarjumah* can also be seen as an interlingual form of rewriting not unlike parody, biographization or anthologization (*tazkirah*), commentary (*sharḥ*), or allusion (*talmīḥ*), amongst others. These are all ultimately forms of meaning making, part and parcel of a never-ending process of naming, understanding, and managing difference. The following section delves into the displaced valences of the term "*tarjumah*."

The Semantic Multiplicity of *Tarjumah*

The reification of *adabiyāt* as a conceptual category in the early twentieth century would have been unimaginable without translation. In other words, the making of *adabiyāt* as a self-referential and free-standing notion—as opposed to its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century status as a marginal and context-dependent concept (Fani 2019)—took place in a space wherein *tarjumah* came to primarily signify translation from one distinctive literary tradition into another. Like *adabiyāt*, the semantic and discursive range of *tarjumah* was significantly narrowed in the latter part of the twentieth century. In that process, *tarjumah* began to jettison its meaning as biography and interpretation at a moment when literary history was being constructed as a new genre on the grounds of its discursive ruptures from *tazkirah* or biographical

compendia (Jabbari 2016). The nation-state became the protagonist of historiography, radically changing the context and sites within which biographies were read.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the term “*tarjumah*” and its plural *tarājim* was still used to refer to biographies of notable figures. In the 1860s and 70s, the newspaper *Ruznāmah-i millatī* featured biographies of Persian-language poets and used *tarjumah* on two occasions (August 1868, nos. 21 & 28). In 1926, the magazine *Sharq* (1924–32) featured a biography or *tarjumah-yi ahvāl* of Manuchihri Damghani (no. 2: 10–17); here the term could mean turning life experiences into a narrative. The term was even used in the context of an autobiography as when Mirza Sadiq Khan Adib ul-Mamalik wrote an account of his life and lineage under the title *tarjumah* in the magazine *Armaghān* (December 1933, no. 9: 601–9). Biographies were a key feature of premodern literary cultures and spilled over into multiple historiographical genres such as the aforementioned *tazkirah* (Schwartz 2020). Biographical writing did not stop with the advent of romantic nationalism in the twentieth century; it only spread from one ecosystem (*tazkirah*) into another (periodicals). Early twentieth-century readers regularly came across biographical accounts of literary figures like Rousseau, Lamartine, Hugo, Zola, and Schopenhauer next to biographies of Persian poets and writers. This is the space within which the idea of a nationally differentiated literature took form in Iran and Afghanistan.

The many meanings of *tarjumah* have been registered in ‘Ali Akbar Dihkhuda’s *Lughat-nāmah*, published in the 1930s and 40s. Its entry on *tarjumah* included the following meanings: communicating words/speech from one language into another, biography or an account of one’s accomplishments (*sarguzasht*, *tārīkh-i ḥayāt-i kasī*, *kārnāmah*), naming (*nāmguzārī*), riddle/enigma (*ramz*, *mu’amā*), interpretation (*tafsīr kardan*), and according to rhetoricians, versifying the meaning of an Arabic line of poetry (*bayt*) into Persian (5:6610). It is worth noting here that medieval rhetoricians such as Shams Qays Razi and al-Raduyani used the term “*bargardāndan*” to convey our modern sense of translation while “*tarjumah*” was often used for a very specific usage glossed by Dihkhuda whereby the meanings of Arabic verses were loosely versified in Persian. For each meaning, Dihkhuda cited different sources that include treatises, dictionaries, and histories. Dihkhuda’s *Lughat-nāmah* can serve as a point of entry into the multifaceted history of *tarjumah*’s entanglements with other concepts. But one inference can be clearly made here: the meaning of *tarjumah* was more capacious and less settled prior to the establishment of ontological nationalism.

The close association of the term “*tarjumah*” with interpretation (*tafsīr*) has a long genealogy in the Near East. Thanks to the work of William Hallo, we know that *tarjumah* is derived from the Old Assyrian or Hittite *turgimān* (1996, 163), which took on different variants such as *tarjumān* in Persian and Arabic and *tercūman* in Turkish. Among others, Chana Kronfeld has commented on the fact that *turgimān* assumed the meaning of mediator or translator in Jewish textual culture, describing an individual who provided instantaneous translations and commentary of the rabbi’s Hebrew sermons into local Jewish languages such as Aramaic and Greek (2015). The *turgimān*’s act of translation necessarily included commentary in the form of adding parables and examples to make more accessible the rabbi’s sermons for a congregation that did not understand (a certain register of) Hebrew. By contrast, interpretation and commentary are not in the semantic range of the English term “translation.” That may be one of the reasons why scholars such as Lawrence Venuti have had to remind Anglophone scholars that translation is an act of interpretation in order to advocate for the visibility of the translator whereas in Near Eastern literary traditions *tarjumah* cannot be decoupled from interpretation and commentary (1995).

Tarjumah’s more expansive range of meanings may have been displaced by colonial modernity, but its semantic multiplicity still lingers in ways that have yet to be fully analyzed. For instance, Dihkhuda’s *Lughat-nāmah* affords *tarjumān* a separate entry in which it is defined as “a person who expresses a word/term in another language” and “a person who is in possession of two languages and makes comprehension possible between speakers of those languages” (5:6608). Citing a variety of sources such as *Farhang-i anjuman ārā*, *Farhang-i ānandrāj*, and *Lexicon Syriacum*, Dihkhuda then provides multiple variants of the term, including *Targmanā* (Syriac), *targ(u)mānu* (Akkadian), *targem* (Aramaic), and *tarzifān* (Arabized form of Persian *tarzabān*). Dihkhuda then cites a number of Persian poems in which the term “*tarjumān*” has been used. In this line by Ferdowsi, the term meant translator: *Yaki tarjumān rā z-i lashkar bijust/kih guftār-i turkān bidānad durust* (He searched for a translator in the army/one with a command of the language of Turks). In this line by Nasir-i Khusraw, it means both commentator (*shāriḥ*) and one who reveals: ‘*Ali rā tarjumān-i waḥy pindār/ham ān ma’ni ham in ma’ni dar ū dān* (Consider ‘Ali the commentator/revealer of the Revelation/Locate both meanings [of the term] in him). Other meanings of *tarjumān* invoked by the poems included *faṣiḥ* (eloquent) and *vāsīt* (mediator).

These poems cited by Dihkhuda and the examples analyzed in this chapter collectively show that *tarjumah/tarjumān* was part of a larger discourse of ideas about the role of language, mediation, and interpretation in the transmission of knowledge in each historical period. As such, *tarjumah* should not be treated as a transhistorical and freestanding idea whose meaning is substitutable across different languages, cultural geographies, and time periods. There needs to be more extensive research on the translation cultures of Iran and Afghanistan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Placing This Inquiry Within Translation Studies

This chapter designated colonial modernity as a historical and epistemic designation for certain discursive ruptures examined here. One such rupture was caused by the discourses of nationalism that transformed premodern conceptual paradigms in relation to linguistic and ethnic difference. It is important to note that colonial modernity should be seen neither as a singular discourse nor as the sole epistemic thrust behind the inauguration of modern conceptual transformations in Persian-speaking societies. Encounters with colonial forms of knowledge were no doubt as contextually and discursively varied as they were politically fraught. Each encounter yielded a different outcome in its particular cultural geography, a topic that stands well outside the purview of this chapter. This chapter serves only as a preliminary attempt to investigate the shifting semantic boundaries of *tarjumah* in Persian against the backdrop of post-colonial studies.

The inquiry outlined in this chapter would not have been imaginable without the interventions of post-colonial and post-structuralist critiques. The latter highlighted the indeterminacy of language, framing meaning as a series of hermeneutical and historical possibilities and translation as an act of cultural negotiation between the translator and the source text mediated by the poetics and politics of the target language (Venuti 2019; Kronfeld 2015). Post-colonial critiques have outlined translation’s fraught connections to imperial and colonial powers and its functions within their political and cultural apparatuses (Niranjana 1992). For instance, Vicente Rafael has shown that translation in the contexts of Spanish Habsburg and contemporary US empires was predicated on a logocentric view of language as “distinct from and subordinate to the meaning, will and intention of its speaker” (2015, 91). A series of hierarchical

relationships emerged in colonial contexts between the imperial language and native vernaculars that were designed to uphold asymmetrical relations of power and police access to the interpretation of holy scripture and production of unsanctioned meanings.

Post-colonial critiques of translation are too varied to be rehashed in a single chapter (Robinson 2011). The main point here is that such analyses have made us more aware of the historicity of translation as a conceptual category. Kamran Rastegar has pursued this approach in Persian studies. He shows how translation begins to bear a distinct ideological mold in the aftermath of colonial modernity. Rastegar examines the reasons that a seminal text like Sa'di's *Gulistān* had not been translated as frequently into other neighboring languages like Arabic until the twentieth century (2019). He argues that translating any text as a means of estimating its value and releasing it to participate in colonial or nativist cultural systems is a hallmark of an emergent translation culture that assumed the ethos of colonial knowledge. In this context, translation was seen "not only [as] possible, but as necessary, even inevitable" (2019, 314). In the process of translating *Gulistān*, Rastegar comments on how a generation of Arabic-language intellectuals adopted a globally circulated vocabulary centered on notions of fidelity and (un)translatability, a question to which this section will return.

Similarly, Yaseen Noorani has analyzed how late nineteenth-century Arabic-language intellectuals such as Sulayman al-Bustani (d. 1925) and Ruhi al-Khalidi (d. 1913) created a place for works of European literature in translation and in doing so nationalized and reconfigured Arabic literature as part of world literature (2019). For instance, in order to translate the *Iliad* into Arabic, al-Bustani strategically deployed and recast the notion of *jāhiliyya* as "a universal category that permits the reconstruction of the Arabic literary heritage as a privileged component of world literature" (2019, 252). Noorani also addresses why the *Iliad* had not been translated into Arabic much earlier:

The idea that great poetic works across the world, on the basis of their intrinsic value as expressions of the human spirit, constitute a universal cultural legacy that should be translated into every literary language was not present, and poetic works were seldom translated into Arabic.

(2019, 252)

The bottom line is that the specific cultural context in which Sa'di's *Gulistān*, Homer's *Iliad*, Hafiz's ghazals (Fani 2021), and other literary works were translated into Arabic or any language matters.

In any given time period, translation cannot be decoupled from the larger discourse of concepts and practices that define what constitutes language, literariness, history, and civilization. Otherwise, writing about translation will prove to be an unwieldy task that could produce theories and assumptions that pretend to be universally applicable. The task of historicizing translation in the post-colonial context is crucial to expanding our normative paradigm examples beyond certain western European literary traditions. Doing so would also help us to lay bare anxieties, obsessions, and misconceptions that have become pervasive in our world today. I will briefly comment on two such concepts: the idea of the original and the notion of untranslatability. These ideas not only are harmful, but also risk delegitimizing translation as a challenging yet essential enterprise in a world that continues to battle forms of bellicose nationalism, militarism, and climate and economic barbarism.

Current scholarship has shown how the idea of "the original" is itself a construct, created and shored up by certain translation practices and scholarly paradigms (Emmerich 2017). In examining such texts as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Karen Emmerich shows how "the original"

is not stable and is shaped by its translation(s) just as it has shaped them. She questions the assumption that the original exists in a timeless, fixed, and unmediated form and is only altered or corrupted by translation. Under the ethos of ontological nationalism, translation has assumed the task of resolving linguistic and cultural difference, and its failure is set up as inevitable from the beginning. But this trend is reversing thanks to new works of scholarship. Instead, translation today is increasingly viewed as a "mode of textual proliferation" (2017, 161), another form of mediation or interpretive iteration that adds meaning to the text. In that vein, translation is not seen as a singular attempt to resolve or overcome linguistic and cultural difference, but rather as one solution in a dialogical and necessarily never-ending process of meaning making.

Untranslatability is another byproduct of colonial modernity and its fixation with essentialism. Elsewhere, I have unpacked how this idea operates and how it restricts the types of questions we ought to raise about the poetics and politics of a given translated text (Fani 2021). Untranslatability as a conceptual framework was proposed as a corrective to Anglophone appropriations of minoritized literary traditions (Apter 2013). In that vein, it serves as a gesture of cultural recognition and cautions against the total accessibility assumed by an Anglophone global literary market. But untranslatability has proven profoundly inadequate to the task of meaningfully and rigorously accounting for aesthetic and cultural difference. It falsely assumes that meaning is fixed and that the original exists in an unmediated form to those that read it in the original language. This is what Venuti has called "a source-text invariant" (2019). And as Brian Baer has recently argued, untranslatability falsely poses as incommensurability and reduces translation to a selection of culturally embedded terms and frames everything else as unproblematically transposable (2020).

In an effort to produce a conceptual genealogy for untranslatability, Apter references, via Abdelfattah Kilito's *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language* (2017), the Qur'an which was deemed untranslatable due to its *i'jāz* or inimitability. But two key points are conveniently left out. First, the discursive purchase of untranslatability, as Rastegar has also argued (2019), remained highly restricted to certain texts in the premodern period. Second, translations of the Qur'an absolutely flourished through the genre of *tafsīr* or exegesis, as Travis Zadeh (2012) has shown in the case of the Persian exegetical tradition. Here, we again encounter the inseparability of *tarjumah* and interpretation and commentary in the premodern Judeo-Islamic tradition. Ultimately, any scholar who insists on the utility of untranslatability will have to address a simple question: what does the idea of untranslatability convey that the notion of a challenging or difficult translation fails to convey?

At its core, the concept of untranslatability boils down to a totalizing impulse that operates by policing interpretation in order to prevent the creation of meanings that certain discourses of power view as threatening. For instance, Rafael has analyzed how the discourse of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines deployed untranslatability to flag vernacular Tagalog interpretations of Catholic sacred texts (2015) as perverse deviations from holy scripture. In Iran, untranslatability began to gain currency only in the second half of the twentieth century as a feature of ontological nationalism. Casting translation in negative and dismissive metaphors such as *traduttore, traditore*, or the tired formula of "lost in translation" are features of a translation culture that has yet to fully release itself from powerful colonial and national imaginaries.

Conclusion

The field of translation studies has begun to move past the generic and celebratory recognition that translation played a fundamental role in the inauguration and proliferation of

modernity (Booth 2019). One way to further this aim is to analyze translation in light of its historical contingencies and cultural specificities, as Paker (2002) and Demircioglu (2005) have admirably done for Ottoman and Turkish cultures of translation. This chapter argued that *tarjumah* in the twentieth century should be placed within a node of intersecting and co-constitutive ideas such as history, language, literature, and civilization. Doing so would allow us to historicize translation within the context of Iranian and Afghan cultural histories and approach it in a far more holistic fashion that does not relegate translation as a standalone discourse.

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Part III

Persian Literary Translation in Practice
