Conference Report

Pre-Modern Comparative Literary Practice in the Multilingual Islamic World(s) (Oxford Comparative Criticism and Translation Research Centre/OCCT, University of Oxford, 22–24 July 2021)

Conference Organizers:
Huda Fakhreddine, David Larsen, and Hany Rashwan

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This three-day virtual conference, organized by Huda Fakhreddine (University of Pennsylvania), David Larsen (New York University), and Hany Rashwan (University of Birmingham) and hosted by the University of Oxford's Comparative Criticism and Translation research centre (OCCT), delivered a splendid set of twenty-two papers by scholars from all over the world, examining a broad variety of multilingual texts from Islamic history. In October 2020, the organizers called for papers examining the web of literary practices and critical theories of multilingual writers working in Urdu, Persian, Turkish, Arabic, Kurdish, and other languages of Asia and Africa, which fall outside the Eurocentric purview of modern Comparative Literature. The respondents, including individuals from fourteen countries, fulfilled the ambitious scope of the call for papers.

Thanks to the efforts of Rawad Wehbe (University of Pennsylvania), the logistics of the conference proceeded smoothly. The conference started on Thursday, July 22 at 10 a.m. ET (3 p.m. British Summer Time) with Matthew Reynolds, chair of the OCCT, who welcomed attendees with some opening remarks in support of the conference's mission of challenging Eurocentric approaches to the discipline.

Hany Rashwan then introduced the first keynote speaker, Fatemeh Keshavarz (director of the School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Maryland), whose address, "Multilingual Poetry, the Information Highway of the Medieval Muslim World," focused on poetry's transmission along the "Silk Road of literary distribution and understanding," with the Persian Sufi Fakhr al-Dīn ʿIrāqī (1213–1289 CE) as a prime example. With a review of ʿIrāqī's life, travels, and

texts, supplemented with references to Rūmī, Saʿdī of Shiraz, and several others, Keshavarz argued convincingly for cosmopolitan multilinguality in elite Sufi circles, where linguistic and cultural diversity was embraced and celebrated.

Thursday's first session, entitled "Multilingual Scholars and Scholarly Practice" and chaired by David Larsen, followed Kesharvarz's keynote. Larsen introduced Claire Gallien (Université Montpellier 3), whose presentation was entitled "Multilingual Commentary Literatures of the Islamicate and Their Role in Early Modern Orientalism." In this sophisticated piece, Gallien examined the disposition of manuscripts (including Quranic commentaries and other works of Islamic science) in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish that were gathered as artifacts by Great Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and remain unedited. She argues that the selection of materials for translation and publication in English fed Orientalist conceptions and prejudices and ignored the intellectual engagement that multilingual commentaries represent. Gallien gave the example of Richardson's 1774 translation of Ḥāfiẓ, and its reliance on the commentary by Ahmed Sudi Bosnevi (an Ottoman scholar of the sixteenth century CE), which eclipsed more mystical commentaries by Sururi and Shemʿi in the Orientalist reception.

Ali Karjoo-Ravary (Bucknell) gave a paper entitled "A Brocade of Many Textures: Literary Trilingualism in 14th Century Anatolia, Iran and Beyond," in which he displayed stunning examples of trilingual literary production from the court of Kadi Burhâneddin of Sivas (d. 1398). Pointing to *mulammaʿ* and *talmīʿ* as critical terms for multilingual stylistics in Islamic poetry, Karjoo-Ravary argued for a hierarchical theory of language use in constructing texts for the community of scholars and saints and traced its continued use in trilingual texts with reference to nineteenth-century works from Iran, eastern Anatolia, and central Asia.

Zeynep Oktay-Uslu (Boğaziçi University) presented "Sufi Metaphysics as Literary Theory: Şeyh Gālib's *Beauty and Love.*" Sketching the life and works of the multilingual Ottoman Sufi Şeyh Gālib (d. 1798 CE), Oktay-Uslu focused on Gālib's Turkish *mathnavī* poem *Ḥüsn ü ʿAşḳ* (Beauty and love), in which she found three layers of allegory: a mystical cosmology, a Sufi pathway to the divine, and the writing process. Oktay-Uslu considered this layered analogical tale using its relationship with Ibn ʿArabī's doctrine of the oneness of being and its interaction with Rūmī's work, arguing that only such multidimensional analysis opens complex layers of meaning in Gālib's text.

Christopher Livanos (University of Wisconsin at Madison) chaired the second Friday session, "Translinguistic Adaptations of Genre and Form." Maryam Fatima (University of Massachusetts at Amherst) presented "*ʿIbrat* for an Islami Pablik: Nineteenth-Century Historical Novel in Urdu," in which she examined the historical novels through which Abdul Halim Sharar (1860–1926) navigated his own form of colonial modernity. These contain a unique mix of Islamic scholarship and Western-style rich paratextual notes, revealing Sharar's control of Islamic historiography.

Next, Alaaeldin Mahmoud (American University of the Middle East in Kuwait) presented "Rethinking the Art of

Composition (*Inshāʾ*) in Arabic and Persian *Maqāmāt*: Badīʿ al Zamān al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī in Dialogue with Ḥamīd al-Dīn Balkhī." Using theoretical terms from al-Shaybānī (d. 298/910–11) and Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418), Mahmoud engaged with the Arabic *maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī and al-Ḥarīrī and the Persian *maqāmāt* of Ḥamīd al-Dīn Balkhī (d. 599/1202–3) as multimodal productions. Mahmoud looked specifically at the use of the Persian term *sabk* for the "stylistics" expounded by Muḥammad Taqī Bahār in his *Sabkshināsī, yā tārīkh-i taṭavvur-i nasr-i Fārsī* (Stylistics, or the history of change in Persian prose), questioning the crosslingual relationship of *sabk* with *taṣannuʿ* (artfulness).

Simon Leese (Utrecht University) presented the panel's third paper, entitled "Refrains of Comparison: Bringing the Persian *Radīf* into Arabic Poetry in Eighteenth Century India." Focusing on the multilingual poetry of Ghulām ʿAlī "Āzād" al-Bilgrāmī (d. 1786) and Muḥammad Bāqir "Āgāh" al-Madrāsī (d. 1806), Leese demonstrated how these poets incorporated the Persian stylistic *radīf* (refrain) into their Arabic poetic compositions and engaged in theoretical disputes using the terms *ʿArab, ʿAjam*, and *Hindī* to signify relationships between languages and literary practices in Arabic, Persian, and the languages of India as a critical apparatus for their multilingual poetics.

In the last presentation of the day, Orhan Elmaz (University of Saint Andrews) gave a paper entitled "Contrasting Masculine and Feminine Poetic Voices in Wine Poetry: Cases from Arabic and Ottoman Poetry." Using selections from pre-Islamic Arabic poetry through

sixteenth-century Ottoman poetry, Elmaz sketched the wine-song tradition in Arabic and Turkish with its contrasts in poetic conventions, attitudes, and social functions and its occasional overlaps with love poetry. Elmaz highlighted selections from the Ottoman poets Fużûlî (1483–1556) and Bâḳî (1526–1600), in which abstemious attitudes toward wine contrast with the *fakhr* of wine songs in pre-Islamic poetry. Elsewhere, the female Ottoman poet Mihrî Hatun (1460–1506/1512) composed wine poetry that Elmaz compared, in imagery and sentiment, to the poetry of al-Aʿshā (d. 627 CE).

When the conference resumed on Friday July 23, Hany Rashwan chaired the day's first panel, "Translation and Non-translation in the Islamic World," and introduced the first speaker, Peter Webb (Leiden University), who presented a paper entitled "Arabic Texts as Ottoman Literary Phenomena: The Multilingual Lives of *Sarḥ al-ʿUyūn* (Pasturing at the Wellsprings of Knowledge)." Webb traced the dissemination of *al-Risāla al-hazaliyya* (The witty letter) by the Andalusian poet Ibn Zaydūn (1003–1071) and the fourteenth-century commentary on it composed by the Egyptian poet Ibn Nubāta (1287–1366), *Sarḥ al-ʿuyūn*, which exploded in popularity in the subsequent centuries as attested by the sheer number and geographical range of extant manuscripts of the work. Webb followed Ibn Nubāta's use of a Persian phrase across manuscripts to see how scribes understood it (or not) across time, space, and linguistic difference. On the basis of the content of *Sarḥ al-ʿuyūn*, Webb posits that the Ottoman popularity of the work derived from its presentation of succinct narratives of classical pre-Islamic Arabic

figures, which summarized the cultural traditions of Arab lands under Ottoman control.

In "Islam in the Vernacular: The World(s) of Arabi Malayalam, and Multilingual Imaginaries in Kerala, South India," Muneer Aram Kuzhiyan (Aligarh Muslim University) examined literary production in Arabi Malayalam, a form of Malayalam in Arabic script with lexical borrowings from Arabic, Tamil, Persian, Urdu, and Sanskrit. Kuzhiyan focused on *Muhyiddin Mala* by Qāḍī Muḥammad (d. 1616), a praise poem for the twelfth-century Sufi master Shaykh ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī (d. 1166), which contributed to "translating Islam" for the Muslims of Kerala. Kuzhiyan spoke of anthologies of other "*sabina* songs," as devotional texts in Arabi Malayalam were called. He offered several etymologies for the term but focused more on translations into Arabi Malayalam in the second half of the eighteenth century, situating Arabi Malayalam as a locus for multilingual comparative studies in relation to its many languages and cultures of contact.

Ayelet Kotler (University of Chicago) presented "Translation as a Poetic Point of Departure: Persianizing the *Rāmāyaṇa* in Early 17th-Century India." In this well-argued paper on *Maṣnavī-i Rām u Sītā*, a Persian verse translation of the Sanskrit epic *Rāmāyaṇa* by the seventeenth-century north Indian poet Masīḥ Saʿd-Allāh Pānipatī, Kotler analyzed Masīḥ's faithfulness to the Sanskrit original and his creative process in building the Persian poetic text to argue for analytical criticism of premodern Persian translations through the values inherent in such compositions as Moghul mediations of Indian culture in Persian.

Simon Leese chaired the second Friday session, "Minorities, Shibboleths and Polyglossia." Nasim Basiri (Oregon State University) offered the first paper, entitled "Rethinking Queering in the Pre-modern Persian Poetry: A Dialogue between Rūmī and Ḥāfeẓ-e Shīrāzī." In her paper, Basiri addressed modern scholarship of premodern Persian poetry and its neglect of LGBTQ+ identities. Through her readings of Rūmī and Ḥāfiẓ, Basiri aimed to "save pre-modern queer poetry from marginalization" and "read queerness" into the study of Persian poetry, in the process breaking open Eurocentric, white, cisgender, male-centered comparative literary analysis.

Talya Fishman (University of Pennsylvania) turned her attention to multilingual medieval Jewish scholarly culture in her paper, "Echoes of Arabic Linguistic Theory, Practice and Muslim Doctrine in Jewish Writings of the Medieval Islamicate World." Focusing on Rabbanite and Qaraite authors of the ninth through eleventh centuries, Fishman related the Hebrew dictionaries of Saadia al-Fayyumi (882–942 CE), the *gaon* (leader) of the Babylonian Talmudic academy of Sura in Iraq, to Arabic lexicographical scholarship on rare lexemes in the Quran. Similarly, her analysis of the tenth-century Aramaic epistle of Sherira (a subsequent *gaon* of the Suran yeshiva) pointed to the application of the Islamic doctrine of inimitability (*iʿjāz*) to rabbinic tradition.

Seerwan Ali Hariry (Soran University in Iraqi Kurdistan) ended the panel with his fascinating paper, "Poetics of Multilingualism in Medieval and Pre-modern Kurdish Poetry: Rethinking Macaronic Verses in Classical Kurdish

Poetry." In one of the most delightful examples of multilingualism in the conference, Hariry presented selections of mixed-language macaronic verses by the Kurdish poets Aḥmad-ī Khānī (1651–1707), Nālī (1797–1877), and Mahwī (1830–1909) in which each group of verses were composed in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Kurdish in turn, signaling the poet's virtuosity and requiring a similar multilingualism on the part of the audience. Although Kurds at the geographic crossroads between Arabo-Islamic, Safavid, and Ottoman empires used hegemonic languages in their writings to the detriment of their own, these poets added Kurdish to crown their literary canon with compositions that broaden the definition of macaronic verse for comparative purposes.

Nasim Basiri convened the third Friday session, titled "Catachresis and Creative Misreadings." Christopher Livanos opened the session with his paper, "Reading Christian Heresy into the Qur'an in the Latin Fathers, the Medieval Translators and the Modern Academy." Citing Bloom's "anxiety of influence," Livanos argued that Western criticism of the Quran has centered on a heresiological approach seeking to uncover distorted Christian and biblical sources for the Quranic text, an approach he finds in the "Syriac turn" in Quranic scholarship. In contrast, Livanos hopes for new academic approaches to the Quran to account for its literary and religious significance.

Colinda Lindermann (Freie Universität Berlin) came next with her "Loanwords from Within: Debating *Taʿrīb* in the Multilingual Ottoman Environment," in which she traced the history of Arabic theory concerning *taʿrīb* (Arabicizing) loanwords from other languages, from al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. ca. 170/786) to al-Jawālīqī's (d. 540/1144) treatise *al-Muʿarrab min al-kalām al-aʿjamī ʿalā ḥurūf al-muʿjam.* Lindermann traced the debate from early scholars to al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), through the treatise of Kemalpaşazāde (d. 1534), *al-Risāla fī taḥqīq taʿrīb al-kalima al-ʿajamiyya*, and al-Munshī (d. 1592) to al-Khafājī (d. 1659), who mentions the slang of Ottoman gender-benders under the rubric of *lughat al-mukhannathīn.* Lindermann argued that this scholarly discourse was clearly engaged with the living linguistic and sociocultural Ottoman milieu.

Mehtap Ozdemir (University of Massachusetts at Amherst) presented Friday's last paper, "Debating *Belagat*: The Poetics of (Af)filiative Translation in late Ottoman Literary Modernity." Ozdemir pointed to the wave of nineteenth-century translations from Arabic and French that imported literary values into Turkish and its impact on late Ottoman literature. Ozdemir analyzed Recaizade Ekrem's 1882 *Talim-i Edebiyat* (Teaching of literature) and the controversy that followed its publication, with Hacı İbrahim Efendi arguing over the legacy of *belagat* (poetics) from Arabic in balance with or in contrast to French-oriented literary theory. This literary-theoretical debate reflects the tension between a necessary rupture with the past to build Ottoman modernity and the preservation of traditional devices as encased in *belagat* so as to create a unique, self-possessed Ottoman literature.

Huda Fakhreddine chaired the first Saturday session, "Multilingual Lexicology and Exegesis." Leila Chamankhah (University of California at San Diego) presented a paper entitled "Mapping Ibn ʿArabī's Teachings in the

Premodern Persian Sufi World: ʿAbdul Razzāq Kāshānī's Lexicons and Their Literary Importance in Formalizing Sufi Terminology." She detailed ʿAbdul Razzāq Kāshānī's (d. 1335) prolific dissemination of Ibn ʿArabī's teachings in Ilkhanid Iran (1256–1353) and his own contributions to Sufi literature. The paper focused on three lexicons by Kāshānī: *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya* (Technical terms of Sufism), *Rashḥ al-zulāl* (Distilling pure water), and *Laṭāʾif al-iʿlām* (The niceties of imparting knowledge).

Next, Salour Evaz Malayeri (University of Saint Andrews) presented "Religion and Literature in Dialogue: Nāṣir-i Khusraw's Reception of the Quran and Hadith." A well-traveled Persian bilingual (Persian and Arabic) poet, Nāṣir-i Khusraw (1004–1076 CE) contributed widely to Persian literature. The paper focused on the poet's religious and exegetical thought as revealed in his *Jamʿ al-ḥikmatayn* (Reconciling the two wisdoms). The two sources of wisdom were *falsafa*/philosophy and Ismaʿili doctrine/*taʾwīl*. By comparing the Quran and Hadith with Nāṣir's use of rhetorical devices and philosophical propositions, Malayeri showed that the poet used the Quran and hadith to support his own argument.

This paper was followed by that of Abdul Manan Bhat (University of Pennsylvania), "Prophethood in Poetic Wisdom: Beginnings, *Adab* and Muhammad Iqbal." The paper examined Persian-Urdu diglossia in Muhammad Iqbal's (d. 1938) concept of *payām* as inspirational impetus for poetic and prophetic discourse. Tentatively translating *payām* as "message," Bhat showed that *payām* for Iqbal is both what prophets deliver to humanity and the poetic yearning that poets channel to construct poetic texts.

After discussion, Ali Karjoo-Ravary convened the final panel of the conference, "Textual Practice, Media, and Reception." Suheil Laher (Hartford Seminary) presented an intriguing paper, "Arabic Prayer or Persian or Both? Abū Ḥanīfa's View and Its Legal Reception." Laher traced the history of translation of the Quran into Persian (starting with Salman the Persian, d. 33/654), and its recitation in prayer. Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), unlike other legal scholars, allowed the use of Persian in ritual prayer, perhaps as accommodation for non-Arab converts. The question points to the historical dispute over whether the Quran consists in its meanings *qua* meaning, or in the meanings of the Arabic; the majority of scholars of Islamic law ultimately settled on the latter position. Citing a range of legal opinions from Abū-l-Layth al-Samarqandī (d. 376/983) to Burhān al-Dīn al-Marghīnānī (d. 593/1197), Laher showed that Ḥanafī jurists tolerated the use of Persian in ritual prayer and supplication and faced a consequent anti-Shuʿūbī backlash, which enforced the use of Arabic alone in devotional practice across the Muslim world.

Fayaz A. Dar and Zubair Khalid (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India) offered a joint paper, "Sheikh Nuruddin's *Koshur Quran*: Translinguistic Poetry of a Fourteenth century Kashmiri Saint." The authors detailed the legacy and Kashmiri mystical poetry of Sheikh Nuruddin (1378–1440 CE). Venerated as the saint and founder of a mystical order, Nuruddin incorporated Quranic references, figures, and verses in Arabic into his *shrukh* poetry, to the point that his poetry has been described as *Koshur Quran*, or "the Quran in Kashmiri." His verse also refers to such Sufi figures as al-Ḥallāj and

Rūmī, making his poetry an addition to Sufi mystical Kashmiri literature, which combines Arabic, Kashmiri, and Sanskrit values.

Aqsa Ijaz (McGill University) gave the conference's last paper, "Shaping the Language of Love: The Afterlife of Nizami's *Khusrau u Shīrīn* in Persianate India," in which Ijaz considered three north Indian versions (Persian, Urdu, and Punjabi) of Nizami Ganjavi's (1141–1209) celebrated poem. Ijaz explored intertextuality among the different versions, which articulated the poetics of love and desire in *Khusrau u Shīrīn* across cultures, languages, and time.

Huda Fakhreddine introduced the closing keynote speaker, Michael Cooperson (UCLA), whose delightful talk, "Learning Arabic in Pre-modern Times," was a consolation for anyone who struggles with a second, third, or fourth language. As Muslims conquered non-Arab lands, Cooperson asked, how did the ʿAjam, those who were linguistically "othered," submit to and function in Arabic as a hegemonic language? In answer, he offered several texts that were used as primers for non-Arabs to learn Arabic, including *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān* (d. 150/767) and *Maqāmāt al-Ḥarīrī* (mentioning a Gilaki interlinear commentary) for acquiring vocabulary and mastering grammatical intricacies. He shared anecdotes of Bishr al-Ḥāfī (d. 227/841) and ʿAlī b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ghuzūlī (d. 815/1412) and the linguistic challenges they encountered, suggesting that the formal and rule-bound nature of Arabic and its literary devices was a source of empowerment for non-Arabs that allowed them to excel and contribute broadly to the Arabo-Islamic cultural heritage.

Concluding this amazing range of papers, David Larsen offered closing remarks, reviewing the salient points of many papers and encouraging scholars to follow up on avenues for further research. The conference closed with mutual thanks and greetings from all.

Overall, the event was a sterling example of an intimate seminar in which participants benefit hugely from the papers and feedback of their peers. The online format did not detract at all; instead, it made possible the geographic range of the participating scholars. Rawad Wehbe curated an extraordinary video record of the conference, which can now be seen on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLv1dO-ubwbqhW-zO6fRTdQ5M28L-lYxZY). An edited volume of the conference proceedings is much to be hoped for.