

Book Review

The Persian Whitman: Beyond a Literary Reception, by Behnam M. Fomeshi, Leiden University Press, 2019. (Book Review)

MOSTAFA ABEDINIFARD (DEPARTMENT OF ASIAN STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA)

Behnam M. Fomeshi's *The Persian Whitman: Beyond a Literary Reception* is a welcome contribution to the fields of comparative literature as well as Persian and American literary studies. Using a *new historicist* methodology, and drawing on theories and concepts from several disciplines, Fomeshi delves into the cultural and sociopolitical contexts around the reception of Walt Whitman in Iran to show that the reception—be it translational, critical, or creative—has been more than “literary.” While impacting literary modernism in Iran, particularly by contributing to the emergence of New Poetry, Iranians’ reception of Whitman, Fomeshi argues, has also served sociopolitical and ideological purposes. Throughout the book, Fomeshi shows adequate mastery over both sides of his comparison and over his primary and secondary sources, while also showcasing overall insightful instances of socio-historically informed and contextualized close readings.

The Persian Whitman, excluding the Introduction and Conclusion, comprises nine chapters. In the Introduction, Fomeshi provides an accessible overview of the emergence of American literature through translations in Iran. He makes it clear that while arguing for the influence the reception of Whitman has had on Persian literary modernism in Iran, he mainly aims to render “the Persian Whitman Iranians *construe* and *construct* rather than the American Whitman’s travel to Iran” (6).

In Chapter 1, “Whitman’s Life and Works,” Fomeshi relies on numerous secondary sources on Whitman to provide an accessible overview of his life and poetic career. Chapter 2, “From Democratic Politics to Democratic Poetics,” celebrates Whitman’s political and cultural democracy, tracing it in his poetry and sociopolitical views. The emergent “democracy” in America during Whitman’s time, Fomeshi argues, encouraged the poet to create a new, “democratic” poetics and poetry. The chapter is

filled with laudatory statements on Whitman’s “democracy,” whereas I think readers would have benefited from a more nuanced perspective on Whitman’s vision of democracy. For instance, according to Fomeshi, Whitman

believed in democracy not just as a political phenomenon but also a cultural one. He overlooked any hierarchies and social boundaries; that led to the inclusion of all Americans regardless of sex, colour, ethnicity and social class. He created a little America in his poetry through covering all ethnic groups of his country. (32)

Not all readers are so sure. Some attention to critical attitudes towards Whitman’s more complicated “democracy,” as seen in previous and ongoing research on the poet’s views of African and Native Americans, would have been helpful. As George Hutchinson and David Drews state, “Whitman’s attitudes to people of African descent must be distinguished from his attitudes toward slavery” (567). They remind us,

Whitman has commonly been perceived as one of the few white American writers who transcended the racial attitudes of his time, a great prophet celebrating ethnic and racial diversity and embodying egalitarian ideals. He has been adopted as a poetic father by poets of Native American, Asian, African, European, and Chicano descent. Nonetheless, the truth is that Whitman in person largely, though confusedly and idiosyncratically, internalized typical white racial attitudes of his time, place, and class. (567) [1]

In Chapter 3, “Democracy and Nationalism Intertwined,” after arguing for the intermingling of American nationalism and American democracy, Fomeshi argues for the existence of “literary democracy” in 19th-century American

nationalism, focusing on an extended discussion of chapters from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1840). According to Fomeshi, American nationalism –its defying and exiting the British rule– as well as America's yearning for democracy required a literary/poetic counterpart, a “democratic national poetry,” which manifested in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. In this chapter, too, Fomeshi could have avoided uncritically reproducing colonial narratives of democracy and nationalism in America by inserting alternative narratives or marginalized knowledges. ‘Whose nation and whose democracy?’ one could ask. [2]

In Chapter 4, “A Persian Translation of Whitman,” Fomeshi takes us to the Constitutional era Iran, to historically contextualize the first Persian translation, by Yusof Etesami (1874-1938), of Whitman –an excerpt of a poem which the translator titles “The Great City.” Fomeshi masterfully places the translation within a discussion of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the role of Persian translations from other (mainly European) languages in advancing Iranian modernity. While the reading of the previous chapters could tire some readers already familiar with the topic, this chapter contains fascinating and shrewdly historicized close readings and comparisons of Etesami's translation of Whitman with the original. Fomeshi compellingly shows how Whitman was first introduced to Iranians via an ideologically charged translation. Through deliberate translational choices, he proves, Etesami indigenized Whitman's “individual” poem, re-writing it as one that spoke to collective, “nation-building” purposes in Iran. In Etesami's translated/re-written version, “The Great City” promoted the “democratic ideas of human rights, freedom and equality, hygiene and healthy citizens” (87-88). Fomeshi then shows how later, in 1940s, when reprinted under Reza Shah, Etesami's translation of “The Great City” would serve a different purpose, i.e., that of “lament[ing] the loss of the city's history, memory and sense of identity” (88) due to the Shah's modernization project. In advancing the argument in this and the next chapters, Fomeshi illustrates how “world literature” is sometimes ironically chosen to be received, and serve, as

national(ist) literature.

In Chapter 5, Fomeshi attends to the “Critical Reception of Whitman” in Iran, foregrounding the first critical debate on the poet in Persian by the father of New Poetry in Iran, i.e., Nima Yushij. Published in a music journal, Nima's debate on Whitman was more intended to justify the necessity Nima saw for the emergence of a “modern poetic movement” (97) in Iran as well as to respond to other Iranian poets and critics who opposed Nima's views on Persian poetry –rather than to introduce Whitman or American poetry to Iranians. In this chapter, too, Fomeshi advances a strong and readable argument.

Chapter 6, “Creative Reception of Whitman,” argues for Whitman's having influenced Parvin Etesami (1907-1941) through the former's poem “A Noiseless Patient Spider.” Etesami's creative involvement with Whitman in her own poem “God's Weaver,” Fomeshi contends, resulted in the creation of a symbolic “spider” in Iranian poetry, also finding its way to fiction and cinema. While this alleged influence is never actually proved by irrefutable evidence, some informed and plausible insinuations are offered as circumstantial evidence. Moreover, while Fomeshi introduces Whitman's “spider” as one among many “new poetic characters” employed by an Iranian literary figure to “modernise Persian poetry” (113), he does not discuss or cite any other such “characters.”

In Chapter 7, “Political Reception of Whitman,” Fomeshi demonstrates that primarily through a leftist Tudeh Party's founder, Ehsan Tabari's (1917-1989) writings on, and translations on, Nima and Whitman, the leftist movement in Iran not only connected both poets but also played an important role in orienting Iranians' interpretations of both Whitman and of (Nima's) New Poetry in Iran. Missing in this chapter is a more analytical discussion of the relationship between Tabari and Nima, which, as Nima's lengthy response letter to Tabari (only partially discussed by Fomeshi) suggests, may not have been as smooth as Fomeshi claims. [3] Moreover, while Fomeshi concludes that among other things, Tabari's connection with Nima “resulted in the leftist revolutionary reading of the two modernist poets in Modern Iran in the decades to come” (130), this remains only an

unwarranted conclusion in the chapter.

Chapter 8, “A Persian Translation of Whitman’s Image,” jumps forward in time to scrutinize Whitman’s “image,” both literal and figurative, in contemporary Iran. Closely reading and contextualizing the front cover images of two Persian book translations of Whitman’s poetry, Fomeshi demonstrates that the translators portray him as a mystical poet—a simultaneously bodied and disembodied wise poet-prophet. Fomeshi’s argument could have been further refined, as an unresolved tension remains in the reasons found in his chapter for the translators’ said depiction of Whitman: post-1979 Revolution cultural policies (e.g., Islamic Republic’s censorship apparatus as well as its tendency to politically neutralize potentially dissentious literary voices) on the one hand, and an alleged post-2009 tendency towards mysticism in Iran on the other.

Finally, Chapter 9, “A Post-2009 Reception of Whitman,” argues that in contemporary Iran, Whitman has been used as a safe haven to write back to the Islamic Republic’s oppressive acts and policies. In doing so, Whitman is deployed as a catalyst within an intertwined ideological endeavor by Iranian authors, translators, and/or publishers, in order to voice the unspeakable. A main aim of Fomeshi’s in this chapter is to demonstrate that “[c]ontemporary Iran is not a monolithic, univocal, homogeneous theocracy as often depicted in the Western media. Although many discourses are being suppressed in the country particularly in the post-1979 period, it still provides a plurivocal site of opposing voices” (159).

Many a time while reading the book, I thought it could have enjoyed a more thorough copy editing at the structural level, as it contains numerous unnecessary repetitions of ideas in most chapters. Also, as previously mentioned, I wish Fomeshi had been attentive to decolonial perspectives on modernity, particularly because he wishes more and more Iranians to welcome Whitman as a harbinger of “democracy” (171). Overall, however, *The Persian Whitman* was an enjoyable and enlightening read, not least due to Fomeshi’s enthusiastic interest in a *new historicist* methodology, an arduous and thus lesser practiced—yet often immensely

rewarding—way to study literature. Indeed, in the face of a dangerously increasing, de-historicized, text-and-only-text-based cultural and literary analyses among many Iran-based critics, Fomeshi’s monograph offers an excellent model of historically contextualized readings of texts—readings of which one desires to see more particularly in Iranian/Persian literary studies.

Endnotes

[1] For another critical, yet balanced, view of Whitman’s racial attitudes, see Porter.

[2] For recent critical engagements with Whitman by black scholars and poets, including debates that problematize Whitman’s conception of democracy, see Wilson.

[3] For a reprinted version of the letter, online, see Amirj Hakimi’s “Do-L” blog entry of April 26th, 2010.

Works Cited

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Author’s biography

Mostafa Abedinifard is an assistant Professor of Persian Literary Culture and Civilization. He is a literary and cultural critic and historian, with a special focus on Persian literature and the Iranian culture and cinema, within his broader interests in comparative and world literature.