

HANY RASHWAN – REBECCA RUTH GOULD – NASRIN ASKARI (eds.): Arabic, Persian, and Turkic Poetics. Towards a Post-Eurocentric Literary Theory

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The volume under review is a unique collection of papers by scholars of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literatures. It features 13 studies devoted to thinking about literature in the Islamicate world, along with an introduction by one of the editors. Although the volume's focus is limited to this particular shared literary sphere, it may also be of interest to all working in general literary theory. In fact, it is the ambition of the editors themselves to reach a wider audience of literary scholars, as the volume situates itself in the discourse of the disciplines of comparative literature and world literature studies. Rebecca Ruth Gould elaborates upon this in the introduction, which serves as a call for a post-Eurocentric literary theory. In this regard, her remark that “even when the canon of world literature is increasingly decolonized, literary theory as such remains Eurocentric” (3) deserves emphasis.

The concept of *balāgha* is central to understanding literature in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic cultures. Therefore, in the first chapter, another of the editors, Hany Rashwan, illustrates the significance of this concept in medieval Arab-Islamic cultures (the word “medieval” should here imply a specific time period, rather than that the category of the Middle Ages is relevant for this part of the world). He points out that the Arabic tradition recognized two rhetorical systems: *khiṭāba* (persuasion via public oral speech) and *balāgha* (eloquence). *Balāgha* has served as the matrix for the production and reception of Arabic, Persian, and Turkic literary texts for over a thousand years. In the next chapter, Lahcen El Yazghi Ezzaher examines the translation

of several technical terms from Aristotle's *Rhetorics* into Arabic, as his work significantly shaped Arabic thinking about literature. Furthermore, Linda G. Jones examines the poetics of *khuṭba*, *khiṭāba*, and *balāgha* as described by Ibn Abd Rabbih of Córdoba.

The next three chapters are devoted to Persian poetics. Leila Seyed-Ghasem looks into the poetics of preposing (*taqdīm*) and postposing (*ta khīr*) in an 11th-century Persian prose text, *Tārīkh-i Bayhaqī* (The history of Bayhaqī) by Abu'l-Fazl Bayhaqī. Natalia Chalisova focuses on ambiguity in Persian poetics and ghazal poetry. Asghar Seyed-Gohrab elaborates on Persian literary riddles in the work of the 13th-century poet Maj al-Din Hamgar. In the next chapter, Nicola Carpentieri shifts the attention to the Maghrib region. She addresses the topic of aging in the works of Arabic writers, including Ibn Rashiq, Hazim al-Qartajanni, and Ibn Hamdis.

The focus of subsequent chapters is Turkic literary culture. Marc Toutant discusses Central Asian works on prosody and attempts to answer the question of why their authors retained the Persian framework, despite adopting genres specific to Turkic poetry. His article challenges the pervasive power of Eurocentrism in Turkic studies, as evident in attempts to uncover Turkicness in works from the region. Aışe Handan Konar explores the Arabic and Persian concept of imitation (*tetebbu'*) in 16th-century Ottoman biographies of poets. She argues that it is possible to speak about a shared Islamic poetics, as well as minor, regional poetics, such as Ottoman

poetics. Berat Açı also tackles the problem of Ottoman poetics. In particular, he discusses how Sheikh Galib legitimized poetry in the 18th century. Todd Lawson focuses on the ideas about language and figuration in the writings of the early-19th-century Arab scholar Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'î.

The last two chapters are devoted to contemporary developments in the literature of the Arab-Islamic region. Haifa Alfaisal examines the shift from a focus on eloquence (*balāgha*) to criticism (*intiqād*) in Arabic literary thought during the 19th and 20th centuries. Her chapter illustrates the complexity of developing a post-Eurocentric literary theory, as Western thought has been adopted in very different ways in Arab countries, often with the support of local traditions and cultural contexts.

In the last chapter, Chiara Fontana demonstrates how a *balāgha*-grounded analysis of modern Arabic poetry might be conducted. She analyzes the poem “Kalimāt fī al-ḥubb” (Love words) by the Egyptian author Naguib Surur. Although not suggested by the author, this study raises the question of whether this important category of Arab-Islamic literary thinking can be applied cross-culturally. Employing it in the analysis of literary works outside of the region would be an interesting exercise in exploring its potential.

Although I read the book as a non-specialist in Arab-Islamic cultures, I believe that the proposal of using the concept of *balāgha* for literary theory and analysis deserves careful consideration. Several scholars have argued in recent decades that the Western conception of literature is not universal. If it is perceived as such, it is only so as a result of the hegemony of Western academia. It has also been repeatedly noted that the study of non-Western literature should consider the conceptualization of literature within its original cultures.

Interestingly, the challenge of non-Western literary theory extends beyond the Western world. The volume demonstrates that literary studies in the Arab-Islamic region also need to reconnect with their intellectual her-

itage. Of course, the question remains how to achieve it. It is not possible to simply discard recent developments shaped by Western paradigms and replace them with approaches deemed traditional or indigenous. This may also explain the editors' cautious approach in presenting their project, since they view the volume as merely a contribution *toward* a post-Eurocentric literary theory and defer its full articulation to the future.

Comparative studies began in the 19th century with the intention of including non-Western materials, but they did so within a Eurocentric and hierarchical framework. Currently, a growing number of scholars are aware of this issue. However, it is not clear how to solve it. Whereas it may be possible to switch between various conceptualizations of literature for the specialist, it seems unlikely for a general reader. It is also an open question whether a general theory of literature that takes into consideration the conceptualizations of literature from other parts of the world is possible. Moreover, in comparative literary studies, it is not entirely clear what we are doing when we engage in comparison, as we lack an established theory to direct our practice. At the same time, developing such a theory seems to depend on the very act of comparing.

The volume's authors appear to be aware of many of these issues, including the fact that the discourse surrounding this attempt at decolonizing literary studies is conducted in English. Nevertheless, a post-Eurocentric literary theory remains a compelling and relevant goal in an increasingly connected world we inhabit. Hopefully, the discussion about the issues raised in the volume will continue with scholars of Chinese and Indian cultures, both of which exhibit rich and long traditions of thinking about literature.

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