Rethinking the Islamicate Through Translation: Crossings and Currents

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To step into the Islamicate literary world is to enter a river with many mouths and no fixed banks—braided, glinting, unruly. Here, currents of Persian, Arabic, Malayalam, Kurdish, and many more weave together and diverge, each channel carving new pathways through cultural landscapes. Each current carries its own sediment: memories of conquest and kinship, devotion and defiance, longing and home. These are not quiet waters. They erode and build, cut through stone, and overflow into new terrains. In this river, there are no pure sources, only crossings—moments where form and language touch, separate, and touch again.

The works collected in this issue are such crossings. Some arrive in translation, others as reflections on untranslatability. Some speak from the mother tongue, others from a language chosen, inherited, or imposed. Together, they map a world where the Islamicate is less a category than a pulse—felt in ghazals and sermons, lullabies and state decrees, etched into memory, sometimes even in the absence of script. To read these texts is to immerse oneself in a living river, one that invites us to rethink belonging, power, and voice in the ceaseless flow of history and culture. As we made our way through these unique entries that resonate with other places, times, peoples, and languages, instead of coherence we saw a playful porosity of boundaries and insistent desires of transformations of forms, genres, and spatio-temporal conceptions. The translations in this issue revel in this paradox that Mana Kia calls a "coherent contradiction"—that is, a multiplicity of meanings grounded in a singularity of vision.[1]

We take the Islamicate not as an externally demarcated entity that has well-defined geographical, political, demographic, or linguistic contours, but instead focus on situated negotiations with such boundaries from the inside out. This issue takes Shahzad Bashir's notion of the Islamic as "historically contingent self-understandings" as a starting point to explore a complex set of literary addresses to perceived boundaries within the Muslim world.[2] We think of boundaries not just as limitations to defining selves but also as enabling negotiations with different structures of meaning. That is to say, rather than thinking of the Islamicate as an already existing mode of being, each translation in this issue demonstrates the Islamicate as a way of imagining and writing selves and worlds from situatedness within a specific set of contextual factors. We use the term *Islamicate* over *Islamic* not to downplay the element of religion and render it into a sanitized, secular object fit for consumption in the West, but to expand the spheres of life experiences in which Islam plays a defining role. Thus, this issue tackles questions of linguistic, sectarian,

[1] See Mana Kia, *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin Before Nationalism* (Stanford University Press, 2020), 10.

[2] See Shahzad Bashir, "On Islamic Time: Rethinking Chronology in the Historiography of Muslim Societies," *History and Theory* 53, no. 4 (December 2014): 531.

religious, and gender minoritization, as well as marginality of genres and media, to see the Islamicate as a germane ground to think about lives, literatures, and cultures.

We had set out to challenge the overdominance of specific languages as the cosmopolitan languages of Islam—Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Turkish, to name a few. This is reflected in the range of languages included in this issue, such as Punjabi, Assamese, Malayalam, Amazigh, Armeno-Turkish, and Dari. The earliest piece in the issue, Sunil Sharma's translation from the 16th-century *Karnama-yi Munir*, is a case in point. As a text written by a non-native speaker of Persian in order to stake a powerful claim to the long tradition of Persian poetry from the Mughal court, Sharma's translation demonstrates the crucial fault lines that the modern world inherited from the premodern. These fault lines around languages, nativeness, and literary heritage not only demonstrate boundaries that fractured the shifting landscapes of the Muslim world but also exist as ways of playing with generic conventions as well as claims to a malleable literary heritage. His case illustrates how Persian, as a cosmopolitan language, enabled a shared literary idiom that could unite native and non-native speakers across vast geographies. But it also reveals how linguistic and cultural hierarchies persisted even within this inclusive frame. Munir's text reveals the ambivalence of Persian's cosmopolitan promise: While it provided mobility across imperial and linguistic borders, it also imposed cultural hierarchies that excluded certain voices based on origin, accent, or regional affiliation.

If Munir's voice captures the ambivalent position of a marginalized poet in the heart of a premodern cosmopolitan empire, the latest entry in the issue, Ibrahim Badshah's translations of five ghazals from Malayalam from the early 21st century, offers a resonant counterpoint. These poems stand as a testament to the fundamental malleability of form, genre, and literary heritage in the Islamicate world. Badshah's translations of five brief ghazals allow us to see the centuries-long history of the genre through multiple languages and through its eventual, kaleidoscopic renditions in Malayalam. Beyond temporality, the geographical circulation of these genres also reimagines the boundaries of what is conventionally understood as the Muslim world.

The spatial arc in this issue moves beyond the subcontinent. "Three Islamicate Songs from Metro Detroit" transports us across the Atlantic Ocean to early 20th-century North America, where Turkish, Armenian, and Arab immigrants from the former Ottoman territories adapted Islamicate poetic forms within diasporic communities. Detroit, in this instance, becomes not a peripheral outpost, but a part of the Islamicate sphere of influence. As genres travel, they are also made anew, transforming the contours of social and cultural lives in both the place of origin and the destination. This issue embraces the ethos of movement where the genres redraw the contours of belonging, aesthetics, and memory in both their points of departure and arrival. As a collection conceptualized in the greater Detroit area, this issue seeks to think of its own location of production as a part of this history of moving genres, texts, languages, and literary predilections, through the infinite malleability of the literary and linguistic repertoire of the Islamicate.

Fragmented Persians

The three pieces from Persian demonstrate the malleability of even the so-called dominant languages. While Sharma's translation makes Persian speak to its South Asian entanglement, Tyler Fisher and Haidar Khezri's translation of the Kurdish writer and thinker Farzad Kamangar highlights a Persian mobilized to speak to the experiences of non-Shia Kurds, negotiating "boundaries of his stateless identity, [and] a minority by religious sect, ethnicity, and language," as Fisher and Khezri put it eloquently in their preface. His poetry, while linguistically Persian, resists Persianate hegemony by carrying the cadences and sensibilities of Kurdish life and struggle. Kamangar's poems thus extend the political valence of prison literature into the lyric mode while also gesturing to gendered dimensions of resistance. His voice speaks to the intertwined poetics of grief, endurance, and embodied dissent—resonant, too, with the ongoing reverberations of the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom."

Similarly, while Mostafa Abedinifard's translation of Sadeq Hedayat's *The Pearl Cannon* represents the mainstream literary

tradition of Persian, the text mounts a powerful attack on Iranian historiography and self-mythologizing. In doing so, it challenges the monolithic identities constructed through such narratives and fractures the coherence of Persian as a nationalistic literary vehicle. Abedinifard demonstrates how Hedayat mobilizes a wide spectrum of linguistic registers—from high literary to coarse colloquial—to create a deliberately dissonant and fragmented text. This multiplicity unsettles any fixed sense of language or identity and reveals the internal fractures of Persian itself. Hedayat's Persian is contradictory, irreverent, and politically charged—a potent reminder that even dominant languages harbor within them the capacity for resistance, rupture, and critique.

From Multilingualism to Multiformity

The same linguistic dissonance is also represented in texts belonging to hyphenated linguistic traditions—those that blur or bridge established language categories. Michael Pifer's translation "I Went into the Garden" from Armenian and Ihsan Ul-Ihthisam, Ameen Perumannil Sidhick, and Afeef Ahmed's translation of Muḥyuddīn's biography from Arabi-Malayalam both capture the mobility of language and literature in the Islamicate sphere, not just between cohesively identifiable languages, but across languages in the process of formation that were themselves transformed through these exchanges. These translations illuminate how literary multilingualism is not always a matter of discrete, stable tongues but often emerges through contact zones of script, sound, and genre. At the same time, both texts showcase migrations of genres, much like Ibrahim Badshah's translations of Malayalam ghazals. Muḥyuddīn's biography is a case study in the migration of a staple genre within the Islamicate—that is, *sīrah* or biography writing—and demonstrates that genres did not just migrate unidirectionally, but as genres like the *sīrah* moved from Arabic to Malayalam, their poetic and literary vocabulary and affective pull transformed the genre as well. A similar trend can be found in the biography of Prophet Muhammad, *Nabi*

Nāṇayam, translated from Malayalam by Musab Abdul Salam. Translations by Kristin Dickinson and Pifer, on the other hand, showcase the ghazal genre's peregrinations across the Ottoman Empire and then all the way to the Metro Detroit area in the early 20th century. At the same time, much like Tyler and Khezri's translation, Pifer's translation and its inclusion push the boundaries of who can and cannot make a literary address within the Islamicate ethos.

In these texts, whether composed in dominant, minority, or transitional languages, we see the same principle at work: the Islamicate as a space of multilingual, transhistorical, and transregional experimentation. Genres travel. Languages bend. Forms are rearticulated across political borders and cultural thresholds. And in every case, literature becomes a means of negotiating identity, affiliation, resistance, and belonging. Translation, then, is fundamental to this issue, not just as a method to bring together these diverse voices, but as a method of the Islamicate itself, which we see as borne out of endless translations.

This issue also features the work of a Muslim woman writer whose linguistic identity embodies the complex, layered affiliations and contradictions of late colonial and early postcolonial India. Writing primarily in Malayalam, her mother tongue, alongside Hindi—the language she embraced as emblematic of the emerging Indian nation—her literary expression navigates a multilingual landscape that shapes and reshapes Muslim womanhood. Notably, unlike many other contributors whose works center Arabic as a critical marker of Muslim identity, Arabic is largely absent here. This absence itself is telling, pointing to the diverse ways Muslim identities have been formed and articulated beyond the liturgical language of Islam. While other texts here engage deeply with genres such as the ghazal and languages such as Urdu, this author's work foregrounds the lived, embodied experience of identity formation within the intersections of language, gender, and nationalism. Through this lens, the issue broadens its exploration of Islamicate multilingualisms, emphasizing not only poetic and linguistic forms but also the varied modalities of Muslim womanhood and self-expression.

Translating Orality

The refusal of coherence extends beyond language to the very forms and media through which stories circulate. *The Legends of the Panjâb*—a collection of oral narratives rendered into written form—demonstrates the instability not only of language but of narrative itself. The story of Sarwan and Farijan, preserved in three different versions, exemplifies how oral traditions generate layered and divergent textual afterlives depending on who does the telling, the translating, and the recording. As the story moves from oral performance to print, it is shaped by the translator's choices, the sociolinguistic codes of the time, and the communities who received each version. Two of the variants, for instance, circulated among courtesans, complicating any clear boundary between elite and subaltern, sacred and profane, or canonical and marginal. Linguistically, the narrative's weaving of Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, and Haryanvi dialects defies the rigid language classifications that emerged under colonial regimes and continue to dominate modern understandings of literary language. In this context, the text gestures toward an earlier, more fluid linguistic ecology of the Islamicate world—one in which dialect, register, and genre intermingled freely and in which the boundaries between speech and writing, folk and literary, sacred and secular remained porous.

This interplay between orality, authority, and affect is also central to "Reading the Letter," a quietly compelling story that stages the painful tension between languages of intimacy and those of power. Told from the perspective of a young Amazigh woman growing up in a Moroccan village where only Arabic is deemed worthy of script, the story reveals the deep psychic and political consequences of being unable to imagine one's mother tongue as a written language. Here, Arabic becomes the sanctioned language of religion and state, embodied by the village imam, while Amazigh, the language of the protagonist's mother and maternal affection, remains unwritten, domestic, and precariously positioned outside of legitimacy. Yet the narrative also charts a remarkable reversal: Through her eventual encounter with European linguistic infrastructures, the protagonist discovers Amazigh in written form abroad—an unsettling but

empowering moment that reframes colonialism not only as domination but also as a disruptive force within older hierarchies of the Global South.

The translators' labor in rendering this layered linguistic world into English speaks directly to the stakes of this issue. In choosing how to carry across affective nuance, cultural memory, and asymmetrical power dynamics embedded in the original, the translators of these works ask us to consider what is inevitably lost—and unexpectedly gained—when unwritten languages are made legible, both on the page and across borders.