

ABSTRACTS

First European Round Table on Modern Persian Literature

4–7 July 2024, Bamberg

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**First European
Round Table on
Modern Persian
Literature**

4–7 July 2024

Convenors:
Julie Duvigneau
Goulia Ghardashkhani
Christoph U. Werner



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ABSTRACTS

First European Round Table on Modern Persian Literature

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Keynote

Thursday, 4 July 2024 | 18:15 – 19:30

Sadeq Hedayat and Europe: A Modernist among Modernists

Marta Simidchieva (Toronto)

This paper studies the germination of Sadeq Hedayat’s avant-garde novel, *The Blind Owl/Buf-e kur* (1936-37, Bombay), a cornerstone of modern Persian literature. It explores Hedayat’s formative years, tracing his journey from Tehran to Europe, and eventually to India where he self-published the novel. Rather than identifying specific literary influences, the study examines typological parallels between Hedayat’s creative choices and Modernist practices. It argues that *The Blind Owl* serves not only as a work of fiction but also as a literary manifesto advocating for Iranian cultural reform. Special attention is given to the author’s engagement with Persian cultural heritage, its reception in Europe, and his responses to social and cultural dynamics in both Iran and France.

Drawing from Hedayat’s early writings and correspondence, the theoretical framework of the study is informed by T.S. Eliot’s notion of tradition and individual talent, as well as the Modernist slogan of “Make It New,” as articulated by Ezra Pound’s eponymous collection of essays (1934).

Panel I: Beasts and Boundaries

Friday, 5 July 2024 | 10:30 – 12:00

Bijan Mofid’s *Jān Nesār*: An Irreverent Exploration of Autocracy’s Absurdities

10:30 – 11:00 | Emil Madsen Brandt (København)

To the limited extent that the playwright Bijan Mofid (1935-1984) has been the object of academic attention, scholars have tended to focus on his famous play *Shahr-e Qeşşe* (e.g. Ritzel-Moosavi Male 1993, Alizadeh 2014, Amanat 2017, Charney 2020). The present paper explores Mofid’s less known satirical piece *Jān Nesār* (The Humblest of Servants, 1973).

This play tells the story of life at the court of a fictitious, hot-headed sultan. Much of the text consists of lengthy, absurd dialogues between the comically forgetful monarch and his devoted but dim-witted grand vizier. Plagued by conflicting feelings of rage, fear, and erotic passion, the monarch takes out his inner frustrations on the vizier, whom he asks to order his own decapitation. In a surrealist turn of events, the vizier's severed head starts talking and, at regular intervals throughout the rest of the play, verbally displays its undying loyalty to the sultan.

In this paper, I present a new historicist analysis of *Jān Nesār* and discuss the play as an irreverent, liberal critique of monarchical autocracy. Pointing to the historical context and Mofid's employment of *Verfremdungseffekte*, I argue that the playwright frames autocratic arbitrariness as an issue of timely relevance in late Pahlavi Iran.

Werewolves and the Walking Dead, Metamorphosis in Contemporary Iranian Prose

11:00 – 11:30 | Julie Duvigneau (Paris)

Fifteen years apart, two novels dealing with lycanthropy were published in Iran. In 2002, Mahsa Moheb-Ali published *The Grey Curse*, and in 2017, Peyman Esmaili's *The Sentinel* was published. However, between the main character in Mahsa Moheb-Ali's novel, whose mother is a female jinn, whose grandmother is an *efrite*, whose ancestor is a goddess and who struggles against her involuntary transformations into a female wolf with antidepressants; and Peyman Esmaili's hero Siamak, struggling in the snowy mountains of Iranian Kurdistan to save a little boy from his uncle who has become a werewolf, the differences are innumerable. Indeed, Esmaili's werewolf has features of the walking dead, even vampires, and thus seems to build a bridge with the walking dead in Nasim Mar'ashi's *Pruning*. Is the apparition of these fantastical creatures in Iranian literature a mere coincidence? Does it open the door to the development of fantasy in Iran? What do these otherworldly monsters tell us about the phantasm and traumas of contemporary Iran?

This paper is an invitation to dive into the depths of horror.

After Piruz: Leopards and Humans in Three Texts

11:30 – 12:00 | Amir Moosavi (Newark, NJ)

On May 1, 2022, an Asiatic cheetah (*yuz-palang*) named Piruz was born in captivity in Iran to much celebration. The species is considered "critically endangered" both in Iran and the region. Nearly ten months later, coinciding with ongoing protests throughout the country, Piruz died from kidney failure. Among other things, his death brought renewed attention to the critical importance of animal conservation and the climate crisis in Iran.

Considering the widespread awareness to Piruz's short, tragic life, in this paper I offer a (re)reading of the role of the leopard (*palang*) in three contemporary Persian cultural texts. I compare Shahriar Mandanipour's short story, "Rang-e atash nimruz" (The Color of Fire at Midday), the popular story from northern Iran "Mina va palang" (Mina and the Leopard), and two series of paintings about that story and animal extinction by Naeemeh Naeemaei titled "Under the Earth, Over the Moon" and "Dreams Before Extinction." Thus, this paper interrogates how contemporary cultural producers have represented the leopard, animal extinction, and human-animal relations across media.

Panel II: Genres and Reception

Friday, 5 July 2024 | 14:30 – 15:30

How Should We Understand Children's Literature? The Translators' Voice

14:00 – 14:30 | Mario Casari (Roma)

This paper is part of a larger research project aimed at highlighting the functions and relevance of children's literature within the Persian literary polysystem. Far from being a minor and marginal field – in aesthetic and cultural terms – children's literature in many ways represents the true heir to the classical literary tradition, whose sapiential intent (in the most authentic cases) it continues to embody.

At the same time, although Persian children's literature, in its modern form, represents a relatively recent literary phenomenon, it is a vast field, within which it is possible to identify different sub-systems and categories of agents. An overall study of this phenomenon requires the delimitation of a few main foci as essential pillars for a framework that can then gradually expand in a solid manner.

A significant contribution to the evolution of Persian children's literature between the 19th and 20th centuries came from translations of works from foreign literatures. Within this sector, and with the aim of highlighting the importance of the study of paratexts, this paper focuses on the voice of the translators: by drawing on prefaces, interviews, and memoirs, it explores some of the significant aspects of the cultural choices and projects that their works represent.

Modern Persian Literature: a New Space in the Italian Book Market (1998-2024)

14:30 – 15:00 | Giacomo Longhi (Roma)

Until just over a decade ago, the Italian publishing market predominantly featured Iranian fiction by authors who were based in Europe or the United States and wrote in Western languages, while authors living and publishing in Iran were virtually absent from the scene. However, this landscape is rapidly evolving, with an increasing number of Italian publishing houses now opting to translate fiction from Persian. This shift is the result of a process spanning over twenty years, during which translators have played a pivotal role. In the late 1990s, in particular, Anna Vanzan was the first Iran scholar to intertwine translation with scouting efforts to address the dearth of contemporary Persian literature translations in Italy. Her example inspired others, leading to the establishment of publishing houses and the provision of editorial consultancy alongside translation. In this paper, I will delve into the chronology of this transformative process.

***Le Petit Prince* in Iran: Shamlu's Translation**

15:00 – 15:30 | Natalia Tornesello (Napoli)

Ahmad Shâmlu's Persian version of the famous story *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry is the second translation to be published in Iran, but the first to render the work in colloquial language. While Shâmlu's choice of *fârsi 'âmiyâne* made the story more accessible, especially to a young audience, it also received criticism from those who felt that this Persian version did not respect the linguistic register of the original text.

In this presentation, an attempt will be made to understand the reasons behind some of Shâmlu's translation choices for the Persian version, particularly the title of the story. Additionally, features of the various editions of his translation will be illustrated.

Panel III: Inside Out, Outside In

Friday, 5 July 2024 | 16:00 – 17:30

Representations of Homeland in Modern Afghan Literature

16:00 – 16:30 | Belgheis Jafari (Paris)

In our examination of the representations of homeland in Afghan contemporary poetry, we concentrate in particular on poetry created since 2010 in Afghanistan or in exile. We focus on verses created in Persian language, published or simply posted and diffused on social media. This presentation concentrates on the controversial, diverse and evolutive voices of the poets about homeland, in response to a social context marked by political crisis, insecurity and violence. We argue that poetry is used as medium par excellence to express dissidence, to (de)construct the (supra) nationalist vision of homeland and to imagine new horizons based on taking away or consolidating the multiple borders. The highly politicized Afghan poetry during the last decades reflects a society impacted by social fractures and contested (national) values.

The Transnational Iranian-Afghan Literature: The Narratives of 'Āliye 'Aṭāyi and Moḥammad Ḥoseyn Moḥammadi as a Case Study

16:30 – 17:00 | Anna Chiara Martire (Roma)

In recent years, the emergence of Iranian-Afghan literature has provided a distinctive lens on themes such as cross-cultural experiences, identity, and belonging. This paper explores this transnational literary landscape through a focused analysis of narratives by prominent Persian writers 'Āliye 'Aṭāyi and Moḥammad Ḥoseyn Moḥammadi. Their works traverse geographical boundaries, weaving together the intricate tapestries of Iranian and Afghan socio-cultural landscapes. These narratives not only illuminate identity complexities in migratory contexts but also offer insights into the histories and relations of these neighbouring nations. By employing a multidisciplinary approach, this study seeks to elucidate the ways in which 'Āliye 'Aṭāyi and Moḥammad Ḥoseyn Moḥammadi negotiate and transcend the boundaries of nationhood and ethnicity in their narratives. Through close textual analysis, we will examine the stylistic and linguistic devices, motifs, and narrative strategies employed by these writers to articulate the intricacies of transnational identity.

Turkophobia in Modern Persian Poetry

17:00 – 17:30 | Leila Rahimi Bahmany (Utrecht)

The European concept of monolingualism as a cornerstone of nationalism was adopted by the second generation of modernist Iranian intellectual propagandists. Influenced by the Enlightenment ideas of 18th-century Europe, which promoted a single language as an essential prerequisite and guarantee of national unity, these intellectuals viewed the presence of other languages in Iran with great anxiety and disdain. In this talk, I will present sample poems by a few prominent modern Persian poets who express their fears and aversion towards the presence of the Turkish language in Iran. Through close readings of these poems, I aim to analyse the roots of this phobia and discuss the strategies they employed to reject the Turkish language as an alien element—a contamination that must be eradicated to heal the nation. Through their poems, these poets contributed to a widespread antagonistic culture aimed at eradicating “otherness” by inciting angst to the presence of any other language than Persian.

Panel IV: Intertextualities

Saturday, 6 July 2024 | 10:00 – 12:00

Obsessive Topics, Wandering Motifs and Intertextuality in Modern Persian Prose

10:00 – 10:30 | Anna Krasnowolska (Kraków)

The existence of a constant repertory of formal means and common thematic fields in classical Persian literature resulted in its conventionality and led to a high homogeneity and compactness of the literary system as a whole. The literary revolution, inspired by the social changes and Western influence at the turn of the 19th -20th centuries, brought in a variety of new forms and themes and promoted a decidedly individualized concept of authorship. The rigorous poetical rules have undergone a steady loosening and prose fiction gained a strong position in Persian literary canon. Yet, it seems that Persian literature did not give up some of its old, deeply rooted habits. The recurrence of common forms and themes on various levels of textual organization became less perceptible, but did not disappear. In prose literature it survived as a tendency for the use of common, repeatable *topoi*: themes, images, scenes and motifs, resulting in a dense network of intertextual connections.

In my previous, published and unpublished, works I identified some cases of the phenomenon. The present paper is an attempt at summing up my findings. In order to visualize the nature of interrelations which occur between the particular works of modern Persian prose literature, I use the comparison of mycelium – a network of underground fungal threads from which the mushrooms grow. In the case of a literary system, it is a common cultural subsoil, from which the literary works emerge. The phenomenon is, of course, universal, but in the case of Persian literature, it seems to be of a particular intensity.

The most productive, inexhaustible repositories of Persian literary imaginary and topics still seem to be the classical Persian literature, in particular its epic and mystical poetry; then the shi'ite hagiography and ritual, and finally Hedāyat's works, in particular his *Buf-e kur*. I am going to analyze the ways in which the post-Hedāyat prose authors (Simin Dānešvar, Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad, Sādeq Čubak, Hušang Golširi, Rezā Dānešvar among others) draw from these sources, how they reinterpret and recycle their constitutive elements, and also how they enter in dialogue with each other, thus contributing to the density of the network of textual relationships.

Towards a Surrealist Mysticism: from *Xorus jangi* to Abutorab Khosravi

10:30 – 11:00 | Dina Khazai (Strasbourg)

Closely associated with pure rationality, the surrealist movement has been studied within Europe and North America, distinguishing itself from the similar aesthetics of Magic Realism, limited to post-colonial studies. The paratextual hierarchy of these movements blurs their distinction within modern and contemporary Persian literature. From the short-lived, self-proclaimed surrealist circle of *Xorus jangi* to contemporary artists, the surrealist aesthetics has thrived in Iran and found its way towards a modern, lay mysticism, where body, sexuality and transcendence are transposed to give a new understanding of the human condition. This presentation seeks to characterise the aesthetic development of Surrealism in Iran both as a cultural importation and a renewal of classical mysticism. To do so, we will first extract the characteristics of the movement as a local phenomenon (*Xorus janggi*). Then, Magic Realism and its relevance to the Iranian society with Surrealism will be discussed. The presentation will finish on the mystical and organic eventualities of Surrealism in Persian literature, which in its turn, establishes a sort of continuity between Persian and international surrealism, with special attention to Abutorab Khosravi, contemporary author, who uses the revival of mysticism in modern times to remedy the fragmented Iranian identity in an ever-changing society.

Reciprocal Relationship of Modern and Classical Persian Literature with a Focus on Hushang Golshiri's Fiction

11:00 – 11:30 | Renata Rusek-Kowalska (Kraków)

In my paper, I would like to focus on two works by Hushang Golshiri, namely *Ma'sum-e sevvom* and *Shāh-e siyāh-pushān*, and their relationship to Nezāmi Ganjavi's *Khosrow and Shirin* and *Haft Peykar*. In both stories, Golshiri directly employs the intertextual device, intertwining Persian classical literature into his modern prose on contemporary Iran. The synthesis of modern and classic in his fictions is reciprocal. On one hand, through the recontextualization of Medieval tales, the writer offers their reinterpretation as stories with a hidden political agenda. Simultaneously, the apparently minimal plot of his narratives gains additional layers and insights into their alternative readings.

Hence, by deploying the intertextual strategy, Golshiri creates a sort of semantic synergy, which imbues the narrative on the unfolding history of Iran with an epic dimension and pays homage to Persian literary tradition with its prophetic potential.

Literary Re-appropriation of Persian Classical Motifs and the Formation of the Modern Subject: The Aesthetics of the Narrative in Selected Works of Hedayat, Golshiri Parsipur and Alizadeh

11:30 – 12:00 | Shafiqeh Keivan (Paris)

This paper studies literary reappropriation of Persian classical motifs exploited to narrate the formation of the modern subject in the selected works of Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951) and two of his literary heirs: Houshang Golshiri (1938-2000) and Ghazaleh Alizadeh (1949-1996). I explore how the Persian visual architectural art of mosaic, as well as recurrent decorative motifs in Persian art and architecture, such as arabesques, symmetrical images, geometrical networks, etc. are translated in their verbal forms in the fiction of these modern Iranian writers to weave narratives whose major theme is the quest for the self. Comparing the works of these three writers through this perspective, I suggest that where the modern subject desperately confronts its dispersion and fragmentation and mourns the loss of its unity in the works of Hedayat and Golshiri, Alizadeh celebrates a plural self whose unity is to be reconstructed through its multiplicity

Panel V: Women, Women

Saturday, 6 July 2024 | 14:00 – 15:30

You Are Like a Half-Cooked Crab on a Plate: Women Writing Men in Persian Web Novels

14:00 – 14:30 | Rita Häring (Bamberg)

Persian web novels have emerged as a new form of literature on the internet, written chiefly by young women for young women and attracting thousands of readers, circumventing censorship. Web novels are published in many different genres, but love stories are by far the most popular web novel genre. Portraying love relationships and the process of finding a partner, these novels provide us with a rare insight into the tropes that are popular with a young female readership in Iran.

Based on a reading of the most popular web novels, I discuss the female gaze inherent in them and the forms of masculinity portrayed and enjoyed by the community of Persian web novel readers, arguing that web novels provide a kind of safe space for young women to explore their own sexuality without having to worry about real-life consequences. Thus, these love stories are not read as a mirror of society, but as a playground for fantasies of a young generation that showcases certain cultural and social characteristics of contemporary Iran.

Women Publishers in Post-revolutionary Iran: Gender, Ideology and the State

14:30 – 15:00 | Laetitia Nanquette (Sydney)

The importance of women writers and readers in Iranian contemporary literature has been well established in scholarship. However, the dominance of women in writing and reading does not extend to publishing, with only 13% of books being published by women after the 1979 revolution. This gender imbalance raises questions about the Iranian literary field as a whole.

This presentation aims to understand this phenomenon by delving into a comparative case study of the two associations for women publishers, one state-sponsored, the *Jam'e senfi-ye farhangi-ye zanan-e nasher* (Cultural Guild of Women Publishers), founded in 1997, and the other governmental, *Kanun-e farhangi-ye zanan-e nasher* (Cultural Association of Women Publishers), founded in 2007. By analysing the organisational structures, activities, challenges and impacts of these two associations, this talk aims to uncover the complex interplay between gender norms, publics and state intervention in the Iranian literary field. It also provides a new way to understand the role of women in shaping's Iran's literary culture.

Body Space in the Literature of Iranian Women from Goharshad Riot to 'Women Life Freedom' Revolt

15:00 – 15:30 | Leila Samadi Rendy (Freiburg)

This paper examines the transformative evolution of the concept of *body space* in Iranian women's literature from the early modern period to the present day. Drawing on Judith Butler's assertion that the body is not merely a being but a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, the paper explores how Iranian women have fought for freedom to shape and own their body space.

From the "Goharshad" uprising in 1935, which protested Reza Shah's imposition of the Hijab ban, to the "Woman, Life, Freedom" revolt in 2023 against the mandatory Hijab enforced by the Islamic regime, Iranian women's expectations and demands concerning mobility, social presence, sexuality, and attire have undergone profound shifts.

The literature of contemporary Iranian female authors is reflective of the challenges women have encountered in their pursuit of autonomous body spaces. This paper offers a nuanced analysis of literary works by Iranian women, centering on the themes of body and sexuality. I employ postmodern theories of body space and gender, drawing insights from scholars such as Doreen Massey, Pamela Gilbert, Nancy Duncan, and Judith Butler, to illuminate the complex interplay between literature, culture, and gender politics in Iran.

Panel VI: Times and Spaces

Saturday, 6 July 2024 | 16:00 – 17:30

Writing the Revolution: The Exile Perspective in 'Abbās Ma'rufi's *Fereydun seh pesar dāsh*t

16:00 – 16:30 | Christoph U. Werner (Bamberg)

More than forty years later, the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 has now clearly become a historical event. As such, it has moved on from being a contemporary literary theme to a historical topos in recent fiction. The process of historical fictionalisation has, however, developed quite differently in Iranian and Persian literature, depending on language, location, political orientation and audience. With Belqeys Soleymāni's *Mārun* (2016) I have recently discussed a contemporary text from Iran that clearly defines itself as a novel of the revolution. An example from the field of Iranian-German literature is the expanded rewriting of Amir Hasan Cheheltan's novella *Tehrān shahr-e bi-āsemān* into a novel for a European audience (2012). New takes on the revolution can also be found in the wide range of diasporic, i.e. German-Iranian literature written by authors who have neither witnessed the revolution, nor been exposed to the official historiography of the Islamic Republic. Their writing is informed by the exilic accounts of the revolution handed down by preceding generations. The present paper tries to take a closer look on the exilic perspective in writing on the revolution and the inherent difficulty, if not failure of historical fictionalisation. In his novel *Fereydun seh pesar dāsht*, first published in Essen (Germany) in 2000, 'Abbās Ma'rufī (1957-2022) writes both about the revolution and its aftermath in exile, sketching the fate of a family that is torn apart by the events.

Of Simurgh and the Raven: Maḥmūd Mas'ūdī's *Sūrat al-Ghurāb*

16:30 – 17:00 | Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Utrecht)

In this paper, I shall devote my attention to various aspects of Maḥmūd Mas'ūdī's (b. 1949) novella *Sūrat al-Ghurāb* ("The Sura of the Raven," 1984), examining how the author employs religious and mystical themes, motifs, and metaphors derived from classical Persian intellectual tradition to create a post-modernist novel. Partly based on Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār's (d. 1221) allegorical masterpiece *The Conference of the Birds* (*Mantiq al-tayr*), the novella questions what does it mean to search for the union with the divine Soul, and how could a journey towards the Truth end when it is guided not by a hoopoe, as in 'Aṭṭār's poem, but by a raven. I shall analyse how the author creates various parallel narratives, connecting the main frame story to the 1979-Revolution and disillusionment of millions of Iranians.

Grey Histories, Uncharted Narratives: Post-revolutionary Iran and Its Ambiguities in Zakariya Qa'emi's *Alabula* (Hazy) (2020)

17:00 – 17:30 | Goulia Ghardashkhani (Bamberg)

Approaching the 1978/79 revolution as a moment of rupture in contemporary Iran, this article aims to spotlight a highly nuanced narrative of post-revolutionary Iran through a close reading of *Alabula* (2020), a recent historical novel by Zakariya Qa'emi (1980-), published in Iran. I argue that by focusing on a certain type of middle-class lived experience within the Islamic Republic shortly before and throughout the war-torn 1980s, the novel challenges the official ideological history of the Islamic Republic and that of the Iran-Iraq War exposing the dysfunctionality of the regime's bipolar logic of inclusion and exclusion. Additionally, by foregrounding the destinies of its main characters belonging to that generation of pre-revolutionary leftist political activists who neither fled the country nor were executed in the Islamic Republic's prisons, the novel opens a narrative space that has been absent in Persian literature, both in Iran and within exile.