

Behnam M. Fomeshi. *The Persian Whitman: Beyond a Literary Reception*. Leiden UP, 2019, 240 pages.

Behnam Fomeshi's *The Persian Whitman: Beyond a Literary Reception* proposes to provide a historical overview of the reception of Walt Whitman in Iran from the early twentieth century onward. It traces the transformation of "Whitman"—the American poet—to "whitman"—the global philosopher—via translation. Fomeshi reflects on how the American poetic form and concepts change in translation to mirror the cultural and political expectations of the Iranian society. The author knows Persian literature exceptionally well and he explains the literary Persian reception of Whitman at conceptual, stylistic, political, and cultural levels.

The Persian Whitman contemplates three aspects of the reception of Whitman: "critical reception," "creative reception," and reception through translation. The chapters are arranged more or less chronologically in the order that Whitman was published in Iran. The book is divided into nine chapters. The first three chapters focus on Whitman's life and poetry in the US and trace the political and cultural roots of his poetry and reception "at home." Particularly, Chapter 3, with its detailed explanation of American poetic style before and after American independence, sketches the nationalistic and democratic events parallel to which *Leaves of Grass* was composed. The remaining chapters concentrate on the "critical reception" of Whitman in the works of Nima Yooshij (ch. 5); the "creative reception" in the poetry of Parvin Etesami (ch. 6); and, an the overall reception of Whitman in translated texts and pictures (ch. 4, 7, 8, 9).

While the first three chapters exercise historical commentary, the first literary analysis of the book appears in Chapter 4. Introducing the first Persian translation of Whitman, the chapter puts forth a comparative analysis of Whitman's "Song of the Broad-Axe—Section V" (1867) and its Persian translation, "Shahr-e Bozorg" (the large/great city) (1922). It explains the differences between Whitman's poem and its translation based on the political context of the early twentieth century Iran. "Shahr-e Bozorg" depicts Whitman as a poet of "social order," "law," and "security" rather than a well-known singer of individuality. According to Fomeshi, the modification echoed Reza Shah's modernization project and the collective hope of the Iranian public for the establishment of law and order in the country. Moreover, Whitman's references to female individuality were removed in translation to avoid culturally sensitive topics such as female sexuality, traditional gender roles, or female activism.

Chapter 5 focuses on the relationship between the rise of Iranian literary modernism in the works of Nima Yooshij and Nima's familiarity with the Whitmanian project. This is mainly discussed through the analysis of Nima's innovative poetic style and blank verse. As we proceed, a second comparative analysis appears in Chapter 6, where Parvin Etesami's "Jula-yi Khuda" (God's weaver) (1935) is compared to Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider" (1868). In the light of Parvin's familiarity with American literature, the chapter discusses the character, poetic faculty, gender, and mystical tendency of the two spiders. Furthermore, a slightly feminist reading of Parvin as the first Iranian woman poet of the twentieth century is presented here through discussing her role in the formation of Iranian literary modernism.

Chapter 7 studies the role of the Iranian leftist intellectual Ehsan Tabari in the progression of literary modernism. In 1943, Tabari published his translation of two poems by Whitman with an introductory note in *Sukhan* literary journal. Tabari's introduction read like a manifesto for the Iranian poetic modernism. Poetry was no more "a kind of verbiage" at the service of "metrical rules and poetic forms," but it was there to put "the meaning at the climax." Juxtaposing Whitman's legacy with Nima's blank verse, Tabari envisaged Nima as an Iranian Whitman whose work challenged the conventional literary forms in favor of colloquialism and societal criticism.

The two final chapters discuss the visual and textual receptions of Whitman in post-1979 Iran. While deciding on book covers, Iranian publishers prefer the pictures of an old Whitman. Using a structuralist approach, Chapter 8 explains the reasons behind such a preference. Focusing on a binary understanding of youth versus old age, the chapter discusses the ageist taste of the Iranian audience in perceiving the pictures of a young Whitman as "repulsive," "sensual," and "ignorant," and the pictures of the old Whitman as "wise," "mature," and "Christ-like." Finally, Chapter 9 discusses the difficulties of translating Whitman in the post-revolutionary Iran and under governmental censorship. It brilliantly sketches the methods that the contemporary Iranian translators use in order to "indirectly" communicate Whitman's messages while keeping a loyalist appearance to pass the governmental control. Occupying a space between urbanism, progression, revolution, mysticism, and atheism, the Persian Whitman generally shows how foreign literature becomes an alternative means of expression in non-democratic societies.

The book ends with four appendices that include the author's notes, bibliography of sources, index of terms, and a useful chronological table that outlines the sociopolitical events of Iran parallel to the reception of Whitman.

Throughout the book, Fomeshi carefully maps the links and sequences of literary events to discuss the reception of Whitman. However, as one tries to situate the work in the overall scholarship, a few criticisms might arise. In his method of argument, there are instances where Fomeshi highlights a single reason for the emergence of a movement or a phenomenon (e.g. the projection of Nima upon Whitman as an origin of modernist Iranian poetry). My question concerns the certainty of such propositions. Perhaps, this is a pitfall of the somewhat reductionist methodology through which Persian literature has been historically studied. Another criticism is the absence of an inclusive discussion of American Transcendentalism as one of the origins of *Leaves of Grass*. For example, I was not totally convinced that Parvin's "mystical" spider was similar to Whitman's "transcendental" spider. Taking these into consideration, I highly recommend the reading of *The Persian Whitman*, for it is a unique contribution to Persian studies and reception scholarship.

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