Book Review

Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin before Nationalism

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Mana Kia's (2020) book, *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin before Nationalism*, is a fascinating historical journey into the Persianate world, spanning across geographies of West, Central, and South Asia. It explores the Persianate selfhood before the rise of nationalism by historicising and redefining the meaning of place and origin, expressed in a broader range of possibilities of collective affiliation than modern nationalist frames allow. Addressing the period just before the rise of modern nationalism in Iran and Hindustan, the book’s temporal span lies between the fall of the Safavid Empire in 1722 and the British policy abolishing Persian as the language of instruction in the Indian subcontinent in 1835.

During the High Persianate period (14 to 19th centuries), Persian was the transregional language of power and learning that produced “shared literary tropes, interpretive paradigms and representational forms” (Kia, 2000, p. 9). Mana Kia explores her subject through a major signifier of being Persian - *adab* - a proper aesthetic and ethical form of thinking, speaking, and acting, and thus of perceiving, desiring, and experiencing. *Adab* is acquired or “accrued” (Kia, 2000, p. 102) through education in a corpus of Persian language texts - poetry, storytelling, philosophy, religious instruction, commemoration, etc. As Persians were from many lands, religions, occupations and social classes, the proper form of *adab* enabled them to cohere with their selves and collectivities, place and origin in a limitless, indeterminate, permeable way. Mana Kia calls this relation aporetic, suggesting historicization and reassessment of the mutually exclusive categories of place, origin, and selfhood, that are reinforced by “impoverished conceptual means” (Kia, 2000, p. 25) of modern scholarship. Counter positioning to a certain scholarly outlook, she suggests thinking of geographical place, identity, and language not as excluding and self-contained categories, but as outward-looking and porous ones.

The book has seven chapters divided into two sections. The central premise of the first section is the modes of Persianate place-making. It starts with lexicographic discussions on a range of meanings that define the place in the Persianate world, from objective understandings of geographical place to more subjective, affective renderings. The second chapter discusses how remembering the past constitutes both character of the place and morally justified hierarchy between places. It reflects upon the attribution of affective meanings to places, such as paradisical qualities or expressing exilic longing (*ghurbat*) or nostalgia about the place. The third
chapter looks at the illustrative effects of meaning-making (topographic, representational accounts). It explores certain recognised features of a place that act as indicators of legibility and cast morally justified hierarchy among places. Some of such features explored in the commemorative texts are urbanity, ornaments, educated men, and just rule in the places.

The second section of the book examines the meaning and function of origin among Persians between Iran and India. What was considered an origin for the Persianate is unintelligible through the categories of modernity: Persianate origin was gradual, accrued and transmitted through lineages “that were transregionally constituted, circulating and intelligible” (Kia, 2000, p. 25). Chapter 4 argues that the form of Persianate origin was lineage, where geographic place constituted an itinerary along the diversity of meaningful connections and where homelands were just one (not always dominant) element of origin. The 5th chapter is about kinship without ethnicity, which takes on a question of social collective or collective lineage, arguing that “modern notions of identity are not epistemologically equipped to contain certain historical logics” (Kia, 2000, p. 126) of adab and socially regulated relationships. Building upon the notion of kinship, the following chapter considers how affiliations were marked through naming practices. The final segment of the book turns to practises of commemoration – particularly tazkirih writing – their proliferation and possibilities to articulate selves and collectives of Persianate adab.

The intertextual method in which Mana Kia walks into the subject is the remarkable strength of the book: she brings together various texts of separate genres under a constellation of, what she calls, commemorative texts. Those are transregionally circulated well-known and lesser-known texts written in Iran and India - memoirs, poetry, histories, travel narrative, tazkirihs (biographical compendia), autobiographies, chronicles. These texts are intertextually related and share similar modes of meaning-making about selfhood, place and origin. Through close and comparative readings - a method that Mana Kia calls critical philological engagement – she brings to life these historical texts as outcomes of Persianate mobility and testimonies of a shared cultural symbiosis. By allowing the commemorative texts to speak for themselves, she carefully breaks beyond the core of the established vocabulary when describing phenomena relevant to modern theoretical discussions on nationality, identity, belonging and related subjects. For instance, she avoids using the word “ethnicity” in favour of social collective or collective lineage; or uses the term “geographically transplanted” for persons we would nowadays call migrants. Through this, the book successfully opens a space and prepares a ground for some useful concepts, such as cultural continuum, graduation, accrued identifications, geocultural landscapes, etc. By this contribution of an indirect effort, the book advances the importance of thinking in more expansive terms when it comes to the scholarship on places, subjectivities, belonging, diversity and, indeed, human mobility. It also invites the reader’s attention to historical, literary texts as sources to explore intricate relationships between identity, language, and space in the contemporary world. Simultaneously, the book features many untranslated terms (e.g, madaniyat or tamaddun) whenever it is important to keep the original context.
One of the conceptual threads that started in the book but got abandoned in the context was the connection of the Persianate self with the modern Iranian identity or vice versa. Picking up on the Iranianness in the opening paragraphs, the author presents an intimate familial scene of the celebration of a Persian new year with the readings of Hafiz’s poems as an “enduring remnant” (Kia, 2000, p. 2) of Persian identity. Being an immigrant in the US, the author remembers choosing to be identified as Persian - an identity described as pride-inducing, but at the same time distancing, separating, superior from Iranianness. It would be valuable to see the continuity, connection, or mutual exclusion, of Iranianness and Persianness more elaborated throughout the book. Such an attempt would aptly contribute to the book’s argument by providing more insight about the urge of (dis)identification with a certain self and the process of (un)belonging to a certain identity as experienced by the author.

Perhaps the book or its future renderings could also address the limitations or exclusions of being Persianate. Though the author briefly addresses “modest men” (Kia, 2000, p. 114), women, and other identities parochial to the Persianate, the main corpus of the evidence represents educated men of upper to middle class and their form of adab. This distinction means that certain forms of collectivities are more celebrated in the hierarchy of the Persianate world than the others, but the latter are not quite addressed in the book.

Mana Kia’s book is a rich and multilayered contribution to the scholarship that addresses questions of cosmopolitanism and hybridity, the possibilities of selves and collectives, the relevance of place and origin in the language ideologies, and the cultural and linguistic meanings people endow to physical spaces. The book could be of particular interest to scholars broadly engaged in the study of cultural and social history, but also in the study of human and object mobility and cultural exchange. The book’s methodological implications go far beyond the history of the early modern period and the Iranian/Middle Eastern studies, as well as far beyond the nationalist narratives. It seeks to methodologically extend beyond the old time-space-language compression and embrace the idea of non-ethnocentric, non-placeable, continuous cultural selves. The book itself is a beautiful ode to symbiosis, lineage and learning in the making of a cultural self.