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**TRAVELING TRANSLATIONS AND ORIENTALISM IN REVERSE. PERSIAN  
(HOMO)EROTIC LITERATURE AND ITS TRANSLATIONS INTO WESTERN  
LANGUAGES**

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**Abstract**

The translation of a literary piece always produces a loss that can be dramatic. More often than not, the reader cannot perceive it, unless the translation can be compared to the original. Usually, the passage to another language is more detrimental to the original style than to the content, but also puns and references to the cultural context are difficult to be translated. In the case of poetry, the translator might experience some trouble in rendering rhymes, rhythms and musicality.

Sometimes, however, the original meaning results distorted, not only because of the translator's lack of competence, but also for a precise plan which reflects the publisher's economic and cultural interests. In specific contexts, it is the same translator who censors his/her work, for fear of the publisher's refuse or of the readers' negative reaction. This auto censorship has been applied to many translations from poems of the Persianate world, so much so that Western translators have often "moralized" poetry to the detriment of the meaning and with the loss of important cultural aspects related to the culture in which the lyrics were composed.

A striking example is the fact that Western scholars have translated Persian love sonnets (*ghazals*) as if they were all dedicated by the poet to his beautiful woman, without taking into consideration that more often than not the verses are dedicated to a man by another man. This led to the Western world's suppression of a huge homoerotic literature, and hindered the understanding of crucial mechanisms typical of the Persianate societies.

At the same time, Western translators' censorship reveals another aspect of Orientalism that, while fabricating its own erotic Orient, disclosed its bigotry and blindness by missing to grasp and articulate the profound aspects of gender dynamics in the Middle East.

**Key words:** Persian literature translations-gender, Persian literature-literature of the Persianate world.

### **The trouble of translating (homo) sexuality**

Classical Persian literature began to be known in the West as late as the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century thanks to the French translation of excerpts from the *Golestān* (The Rose garden), the masterpiece written by one of the most celebrated Persian literati, i.e., Sa'dī (13<sup>th</sup> century). Some decades later, several lyrics written by the other genius of Persian literature, i.e., Hāfez, were translated into English, and in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when political events transformed Great Britain into the epicenter of the colonialist world, England became the center of Oriental studies as well as of Persian literature in translation.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, i.e., the "Orientalist" century par excellence, many masterpieces of Persian literature, both written in Iran and in India (where Persian remained the official language until 1834) were translated into European languages, but the tendency to exoticize Persian poetry was evident in the notorious translation from 'Omar Khayyām's *Rubāyāt* (Quatrains) made by the English clergyman Edward FitzGerald. The 11<sup>th</sup> century Persian scientist's quatrains, written as a *divertissement* (Khayyām was, above all, a mathematician and an astronomer) were, in practice, rewritten by FitzGerald who transformed Khayyām into a epicurean, libertine and drunkard poet, thus missing the Persian poet's profound philosophy and *Weltanschauung*. FitzGerald's translation, though mainly a product of a translator and "designed to appeal to a mid Victorian audience inclined to rebel against the restricting puritanism of the Victorian ethic" (Elwell-Sutton 147) became a global success. Therefore, for several decades Westerners had the idea that Persian poetry was mainly molded on Khayyām/FitzGerald patterns.

However, FitzGerald's translation had also some merits, especially that of stimulating interest towards Persian literature and, consequently, the fashion to translate it. Yet, the translators who lived in the Puritan atmosphere of the 19<sup>th</sup> century carefully pruned any possible tantalizing motif, first of all, the ambiguity intrinsic to Persian language, such as its lack of grammatical gender differentiation. As it is well known, Persian (*fārsī*) is a "genderless" language, i.e., the same nouns, pronouns, and adjectives are used for both male and female. For example, the pronoun *u* (و) is used for "he", "she" and "it". Both adjectives and verbs do not have a gendered connotation, so much so that a certain ambiguity may result in the phrase. For instance, the sentence: *u ma'shuq e aziz-am ast* can indifferently mean: "He is my dear beloved" or "she is my dear beloved"

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<sup>1</sup> Though, of course, translations into French and German were also published. For a story of Persian Literature in translation see Yohannan 1988.

or even "it (a pet, for example) is my dear beloved". Needless to say, this grammatical structure has provoked a great deal of word plays, but it has also allowed poets to hide the real target of their lyrics.

It is well known, for instance, that many mystics (sufi) have addressed God as He were a terrene lover; but for sure many poets have also disguised their prohibit lovers (either a "he" or a "she") thanks to Persian favorable grammatical features. Protected by this ambiguity, poets have been able to express their longing for the absent Idol/male idol/female idol; their happiness for dancing with their Love/male/female companion; and they have been able to glorify beardless young men's appearance while claiming to describe the divine perfect Beauty. Surely such a semantic shifting could be applied to a female beloved as well, but in reality, in Persian poetry "the beloved has all the characteristics of a beautiful male with some feminine qualities" (Baraheni 75).

This peculiarity is confirmed, among other issues, by Persianate iconography, especially by that produced from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Persian figurative arts represent people dressed in unisex clothes that do not reveal their owners' gender and whose faces are characterized by attributes common to both men and women, such as the shape of their eyes and mouth, the arched eyebrows crossing on the lower part of the forehead and the same curls framing the visage. In addition, both men and women's face contour is often represented as covered by a thin layer of hair.

However, generally speaking Western translators did not take into account this ambiguous aspect of Persian culture, thus always preferring a potentially more puritan, gender "unbiased" version. Perhaps the most famous case is represented by the celebrated *ghazal* written by Hāfez (14<sup>th</sup> century), a leading figure in Persian poetry, that opens with the hyperbole:

*agar ān tork-e Shīrāzī be dast ārad del-e mārā*  
*be khāl-e hendīsh bakhsham Samarqand o Bokhārā.*  
(<http://ganjoor.net/hafez/ghazal/sh3/>)

Persian poetry is built on several layers of meanings, however the basic reading of the couplet goes like the following:

If that Turk of Shiraz would take my heart by hand  
for his/her mole I will give up Samarkand and Bokhara.

Though also the English language allows the ambiguity on the Turk's gender as mentioned in the first line, in the second one the translator must definitely choose the

beloved's gender by using the appropriate possessive adjective. The high majority of the translators who published a selections of Hāfez poetry in English from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, including the linguist and adventurous spy Gertrude Bell, chose to render the Turk as a "she"; this is also the choice made by one of the most recent Hāfez's translators, i.e., Reza Ordoubadian (82).<sup>2</sup> In the case of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries translators, the choice to render the Turk of Shiraz as a "she" is undoubtedly tied to the at the time common sense of modesty. For example, Sir William Jones, who wrote one of the first translations from Hāfez (early 18<sup>th</sup> century) certainly made his choice according to "his sense of morality [which] dictated his altering the sex of the male, so that the male is charmed by a maid instead of by another male, a change that his contemporaries never suspected." (Cannon 39).

Even the translators who opted for interpreting the *tork-e Shīrāzī* as a "he" suggested that Hāfez meant "He", i.e., God, or, Timur (Tamerlane), the conqueror of Turkish stock whose heroic deeds had possibly fascinated Hāfez. In this case, Persian poetry in translation assumes an almost exclusively heterosexual hint, though Ehsan Yarshater has warned that:

[in Persian classical poetry] as a rule, the beloved is not a woman, but a young man. In the early centuries of Islam, the raids into Central Asia produced many young slaves. Slaves were also bought or received as gifts. They were often made to serve as pages at court or in the households of the affluent, or as soldiers and body guards. Young men, slaves or not, also served wine at banquets and receptions, and the more gifted among them could play music and maintain a cultivated conversation, it was love toward young pages, soldiers, or novices in trades and professions which was the subject of lyrical introductions to panegyrics from the beginning of Persian poetry, and of the ghazal. (Yarshater 973-974)

Although Yarshater states that a ruler's love for his pages or slaves (*ghulām*) was quite common in pre-modern Persianate societies, in the definitions of *ghulām* provided by the authoritative *Encyclopedia of Islam* (whose first edition was published as early as 1913) the term has been deprived of any sexual connotation. By the same token, it is to underline that in the 1986 English edition of *Encyclopedia of Islam* under the entry "liwāt, i.e., "sodomy", the anonymous author speaks about the custom of *ghulāmyyāt* by describing it as "fashion for masculine girls" that would have been introduced to counteract the spreading of sodomy in the Muslim world (776-777). In addition, the author concludes that homosexuality is "caused by genetic as by social and psychological

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For a comparative list of the translations of the "tork-e Shīrāzī" couplet see Parvin Loloī 84-86.

factors [...] but it remains, to a large extent, a vice" (779). Thus, not only the *Encyclopedia* authors do not explain the wide range of significance of *ghulām* and *ghulāmyyāt*, but they also care to take distance from the – for them – uncomfortable nuance of homosexuality that both terms convey.

The effort to genderize Persian poetry in a socially acceptable manner is evident even when the authors of the poems explicitly declared their homosexual bent. The great Sa'dī is a case in point: his most famous work, *Golestān* (The Rose Garden) contains a chapter (the 5<sup>th</sup> one) whose tales devoted to "love" are overwhelmingly about homosexual loves. The British translator Edward Eastwick (1850) completely erased chapter 5, while others "rendered them into Latin or changed the gender roles" (Lewis). More faithful translations have been produced along the years, though they all avoid any comment on the nature of the homoerotic relationships proposed by an author mostly described as a pious sage, a sufi who wrote about the need for a moral and virtuous life. The lack of translation/interpretation of these parts of Sa'dī's production is the proof that his homosexual habits have purposely been ignored, despite the fact that when Sa'dī writes:

if gazing (*nazar*) is illicit (*ḥarām*)  
then I have transgressed a lot  
(Sa'dī <http://ganjoor.net/saadi/divan/ghazals/sh391/>)

he unequivocally declares his passion for young boys. In fact, *nazar bāzi*, literally "to play with the gaze" indicates a common practice among the sufis and alludes to the act of admiring a handsome youth's face as the living testimony of God's beauty; however and notoriously, many so called mystics would play a more mundane version of the *nazar bāzi*.

In his mature opus *Bustān* (The Orchard) Sa'dī regrets his juvenile like for boys and becomes a castigator of those men who attend the company of handsome pages (*sādeh rūyān*, cap. 1 <http://ganjoor.net/saadi/boostan/bab1/sh2/>). However, the translations of *Bustān* always skip these mentions of homosexuality, even though they consist in the poet's condemnation of any possible queer situation. In this case, the purging of the text is not only due to "the taste of the time"; witness the fact that H. W. Clarke's purified version (1879) continues to be *en vogue* and therefore retrieved and proposed again and again by modern and even contemporary editions of the *Bustān* available both on paper and online.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the new editions do not explain why the book is

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, <http://www.enel.ucalgary.ca/People/far/hobbies/iran/Boostan/index.html>.

still abridged: for instance, as a justification to his presenting a further shortened version of the *Bustān* (of course missing the parts on homosexuality!) a curator writes: "Sadly, this edition is much abridged owing to the translator's unwillingness to include discursive text. In his introduction, he explains that, "numerous of the more far-fetched allusions have been discarded, to the benefit of the text." I must disagree with the translator. Yet half an orchard is better than none at all". (Rosenbaum 2010 vii).

While I argue that any abridged translation represents a missed occasion to grasp the whole meaning of the original work, I underline that in the case of the *Bustān* it is always the references to homosexuality to be sacrificed by the translators.

### **The trouble of translating women's (homo) sexuality**

If translating male homosexuality is a problem, when it comes to female sexuality the situation becomes grotesque. Generally speaking, Persian women's literary production has been disregarded in the West until recent times. Naturally, this neglect depends on several factors, such as: a) Persian women poets rarely signed a *divān*; b) their verses remained unpublished or were scattered in literary biographies; c) there was a universal scarce attention for women's literary production.

One notable exception is represented by Mahsatī of Ganja who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and is defined by the *Encyclopedia Islamica* "a Persian female poet whose historical personality is difficult to ascertain" (2009). A possible explanation for doubting Mahsatī's gender identity is that among her *robā'īs* (quatrains) we find some obscene verses and until recently the idea that a woman could not openly write about sex was quite widespread. To the point that the first European translator of Mahsatī's verses, the German scholar Fritz Meier, resorted to Latin anytime the task to render the poetess' licentious words was embarrassing (Meier 1963).

Resorting to Latin as an *escamotage* in order to avoid terms openly treating intimate parts of the body or hinting to scabrous situations was a stratagem used by other scholars, in particular by Francis Joseph Steingass, who in 1884 published a comprehensive Persian-English dictionary "including the Arabic words and phrases to be met with in Persian literature" (Steingass 1973). In this celebrated and popular dictionary, the German scholar tries to avoid any possible direct reference to genitals by using Latin instead than English, especially when the terms refer to female genitalia: thus, *kos* (cunt) is rendered as "*pudendum muliebre*" (Steingass 1028), while the correspondent male organ, *kīr* is more frankly translated as "penis" (1068). By the same token, he describes a *liwāt* as "a sodomite" (1130), but when he has to translate the

word *musāheqeh*, generally used to indicate a lesbian (from *sahq*, rubbing), Steingass avoids the embarrassment by translating it as “*mulier quae confrictu libidinem alterius explet*” (1225).

However, the apex of bigotry is reached by the French translation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century book *'Aqā'īd an-Nisā* (Women's Credences, better known as *Kolthūm naneh*<sup>4</sup>). The text is a critique of some Iranian women's practices written by the low ranking cleric (*mollā*) Aqā Jamāl Khānsārī. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century French edition, *Kitabi Kulsum Naneh ou le Livre des dames de la Perse*, J. Thonellier, translator and editor, gives a completely misleading rendition of the original work. In particular, the last four chapters of the book are summarized into a single one and the translation is far from rendering the reality. Indeed, the last part of the *Kolthūm naneh* is of great interest because it gives many details about an ancient Persian custom called *sigheh-ye khāhar khandegī*, i.e., the temporary marriage of sisterhood. Basically, the practice consists in the vow of sisterhood between two women and the many implications of the custom; and their description given by the *Kolthūm naneh* are worth of a close examination vis-a-vis their misrepresentation in the French translation. The *Kolthūm naneh* describes how two ladies establish such a relation: first, a woman sends a wax doll as an offer of sisterly marriage to another woman with the help of a female intermediary. If the second lady accepts the offer, she has to send the doll back covered by a piece of jewelry. Later on, the marriage between the two is celebrated by a *mollā* inside an *imānzādeh* (a sanctuary devoted to a leading personality of the Shi'i belief), and finally dancing and sherbets happily conclude the celebration (Khānsārī 109-115).

This chapter of the *Kolthūm naneh* is followed by a description of the herbs and fruit ladies would send to their female lovers to express their feelings without using words: the interesting list of objects used in this non-written language is accompanied by Aqā Jamāl Khānsārī's explanations of the “love language” expressed by each single item.

However, in the French edition the story is retold completely different: J. Thonellier briefly summarizes the custom by saying that Iranian women fancy to “*confectionner des poupées ou de petites figures qu'elles appellent de petites mariées.*” Iranian women like to send a doll to their “*amie favorite*” who in case of acceptance “*embrasse la poupée avec joie*”, otherwise, she returns the doll back (Thonellier 139-141).

In the attempt to suppress the clear homosexual connotation of the *sigheh-ye khāhar khandegī* (this expression is completely ignored in the French text), the translator transforms Iranian women in a category of puerile creatures who are happy with

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<sup>4</sup> Name of one of the five female preachers ironically quoted in the book as expert theologians.

exchanging toys. Perhaps the translator's choice is made just in order to avoid the embarrassment to speak about a slippery topic, but the result is that the translation offers another Orientalistic depiction of Iranian women, portrayed as immature beings who live in the harem and keep themselves busy with a childish pastime.

Even the meaning of the food used by women in order to communicate with their intimate female friends is misread: every allusion to the act of rubbing and pounding well explicated in the Persian text (and evoking female homosexual intercourse) is carefully erased. The rest is purified and converted into a lyric attribute to a hypothetical (and unmentioned) Persian poet who sings on this "bizarre sujet" (Thonellier 142). As a result, the decoding of the amorous secret language used by a woman to communicate with another woman is turned into a tasteless litany chanted by a lady longing for her - naturally exclusively virile- object of love.

### **Modern Times?**

Though most of the Western scholars maintained a strict silence regarding homosexuality in Persian literature, nevertheless Iran and its culture became victims of the Orientalist project that transformed the Middle East into a place of lascivious sensuality and endless pleasures. Iranians, in particular, were attributed the reputation of being devoted to pederastic practices.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, the post colonial and post orientalist phase has created a new generation of translators who are, among other things, aware of the value of paying attention to cultural differences and different connotations. This new wave has also encouraged older translators to reconsider their work. However, the weight of Orientalism still lingers on the Iranian intellectuals' shoulders, so much so that the literati of the diaspora seem to be uninterested in conveying the (homo) sexual features of their centuries old literary tradition: maybe because they are afraid to perpetrate old prejudices and contribute to confine Persian culture to the world of the *Thousand and One Nights*.<sup>6</sup>

In some case, Iranian scholars operate a sort of new censorship: it is the case, for example, of the long poem directed at the Constitutionalist poet 'Āref by his friend and colleague Irāj Mīrzā, entitled *'Ārefnāmeḥ* ('Āref's Letter), that consists, above all, in a ferocious satire of certain aspects of Persian society and culture. In his *'Ārefnāmeḥ*, Irāj Mīrzā's favorite targets are Iranian women's seclusion, the use of the veil and the

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<sup>5</sup> On homosexuality and Iran see Guardi-Vanzan 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Such as Hasan Javadi who has devoted many works to satire in Iran and translated the work of Iranian poets such as 'Obayd Zakānī whose lyrical production is imbued with raunchy words and images. See for instance Zakani 2008.

widespread (male) homosexuality. While Mīrzā's verses against the veil and in favor of women's emancipation have been quoted (and translated) by several Iranian scholars,<sup>7</sup> his sharp and juicy condemnation of homosexuality has been virtually disregarded. Only in 1995 Paul Sprachman reported and translated the integral *'Ārefnāmeḥ* (Sprachman 78-96), thus enlightening the full meaning of Irāj Mīrzā's tirade.

In fact, while Iranian scholars prefer to translate Persian "committed" literature, some among their Western colleagues have embarked on the task to rediscover Persian inhibited -both in the mother country and abroad- literature whose erotic and homoerotic vein was often a pretext exploited by the authors in order to criticize their society's vices. Therefore, most of Persian (homo) erotic production can be considered as committed literature as well. One of the first attempts in this respect has been made by Paul Sprachman, whose *Suppressed Persian. An Anthology of Forbidden Literature* presents for the first time in English the uncensored poems by some of the greatest Persian poets such as Sa'dī, Hāfez, Rūmī, Irāj Mīrzā and others.

In Italy the torch for a different reading of "obscene" Persian literature is carried by Riccardo Zipoli whose numerous articles on the topic have opened a new branch of studies.<sup>8</sup>

In the meantime, attitude towards sexuality, and above all, towards homosexuality, has changed; homosexual themes in literature are no more a taboo. A wealth of Persian literature waits to be translated, or retranslated, thus casting new light on the aesthetic, cultural and social aspects of life in Iran.

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<sup>7</sup> See for instance Bamdad (1977), Karimi-Hakkak (1996), Najmabadi (1993); though more recently Najmabadi by commenting that the homosexual parts of the *'Ārefnāmeḥ* went almost never noted (Najmabadi 2005, 148), regrets her "obliviousness" to this aspect (281).

<sup>8</sup> Some of his articles are quoted in the reference list.

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