

# Book Review: Afghanistan in Ink: Literature Between Diaspora and Nation

by Blog Admin

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*Afghanistan In Ink* uses a wide and largely unknown corpus of twentieth century Afghan Dari and Pashto literature to show not only how Afghans have reflected on their modern history, but also how the state has repeatedly sought to dominate the ideological contours of that history through the patronage or exile of writers. **Emily Coolidge-Toker** is extremely impressed with the essays collected here, and recommends the book to students of culture, politics, and linguistics.

**Afghanistan in Ink: Literature Between Diaspora and Nation. Nile Green and Nushin Arbabzadah. C Hurst & Co Publishers. February 2013.**

## Find this book:

*Afghanistan in Ink*, a collection of articles edited by UCLA's [Nile Green](#) and [Nushin Arbabzadah](#), presents a fascinating history of a complicated region as it struggles to establish and solidify a national identity through language and literature. The collection begins with an in-depth treatment of one of Afghanistan's greatest intellectuals and a man who seems to be the defining figure in this struggle, Mahmud Tarzi, and then branches out to address the ways in which traditional forms of literature and various languages fed into and rode out the late 19th-early 20th century. The collection's primary goal is to introduce scholars to a huge swath of literature, in the form of novels, journalism, poetry, memoirs and travel accounts, written by and for Afghans living both within and beyond the country's borders. Academic study in this area has so far been relying on "an astonishingly small number of source materials, of which an even smaller proportion was written by and for Afghans themselves". The goal of this collection is more than met.



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Although each essay can be read independently, the authors have taken pains to reference the work and ideas presented in the contributions of their colleagues. The authors are, not unexpectedly, an international group with an interest and expertise in the literature and languages of Afghanistan; a third of the authors are themselves Afghani while the remaining two thirds contribute expertise in specialities ranging from oral history and narrative performance to Afghan intellectual history.

What is discovered in these inter- and intra-border exchanges is a complicated ecosystem of political calculation, state-sponsorship, tussles between provincials and court officials over establishing a national language, and the distinct impression of a new country taking a good long look around at its neighbours. As Green and Arbabzadah explain, "the nation's fragility is seen to be linked to the sheer range of its cross-border connectivity" (p. xv): loyalties to the larger Muslim community, and especially to their neighbours in India, are held in tension with the desire to integrate the disparate tribes and villages of rural Afghanistan. The country's seat of government is also focussed during this early period on modernizing everything from transportation to printing, and to establish more equitable relationships with European and Middle Eastern powers. Reading the essays collected here it becomes clear that culturally, politically, and linguistically, Afghanistan is a country of complicated interdependencies that reach well beyond its borders.

This 'cross-border connectivity' is apparent both in the physical location of the country and in the diasporic movement of its natives throughout Europe, the late Ottoman Empire, and the Indian subcontinent, as they, along with their country, seek to inhabit multiple and occasionally conflicting loyalties of religion, region, and nation-state. Afghanistan, the centrally located link between the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, and long the focal point of human migration – particularly along the Silk Road – has always been home to a heterogeneous population and this diversity is reflected in the essays' treatment of the difficulty in establishing a national language in which to write and print the 'national literature' of an only partially unified people.

The problem is first presented in Arbabzadah's chapter "Modernizing, Nationalizing, Internationalizing: How Mahmud Tarzi's Hybrid Identity Transformed Afghan Literature", through a historically and biographically rich introduction to "the founding figure of modern Afghan literature." Tarzi, a member of the social and political elite, grew up primarily in the Ottoman Empire during his family's exile from Kabul. After returning to Afghanistan, Tarzi worked to transform the nation's literature "by linking his literary modernization project to the reformist Afghan state of the early twentieth century" over the course of a career that melded "international diplomacy with literature, translation and journalism" (p. 31).

The Tarzi who returned to Kabul after his father's death was a widely travelled polyglot with a particular fondness for Jules Verne, whose novels he translated for his countrymen as models of the marvels of modernity – discussed in detail in Green's chapter, "The Afghan Afterlife of Phileas Fogg". Colleagues and contemporaries were impressed and inspired by his multilingualism; his influence extended so far as to nudge the political elite to become competent in Pashto in addition to the traditional Persian. He addressed a much wider circle through his newspaper *Siraj al-Akhbar* (the first to be regularly published and widely distributed), which published serialized Persian translations of European novels alongside classical poetry in Dari-Persian, Iranian-Persian, Pashto and Urdu. The newspaper, established in 1911, was distributed both within Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries – most notably India but with a readership in Iran, Central Asia, and the Ottoman Empire as well.

Tarzi and his newspaper are presented as an excellent case study for tracing the political and cultural influences in establishing a national language, a subject discussed in broader terms in Wide's chapter "Demarcating Pashto: Cross-border Pashto Literature and the Afghan State and in Caron's *Ambiguities of Orality and Literacy, Territory and Border Crossings: Public Activism and Pashto Literature in Afghanistan, 1930-2010*". As part of the legacy of the Persian and Ottoman Empires, all Afghani state business was conducted and recorded in Persian by largely foreign scribes while the vast majority of the remaining population was illiterate and spoke a variety of Pashto and Arabic dialects. Tarzi's newspaper, published initially in a simplified Persian "prioritizing the functionality of language as a tool of communication over the aesthetic considerations of eloquence and style" (p. 48), was the most concerted effort to reach a population just beginning to show the effects of new state schools and in addition to providing prose written for the general public, "made heavy use of Persian adaptation of English and French terminology" – a habit which emphasized the language's ability to adjust to life outside the courts.

Despite having put all this effort into democratizing Persian, in 1915 Tarzi turned right around and began to argue that Pashto ought to be the national language of Afghanistan. Where Persian was an international language, Pashto represented for Tarzi a language "particular only to [the Afghani people]" which he enjoined his countrymen to "protect ... as though it were our soul." He called on the state to prepare Pashto textbooks for use in the nation's schools, and to create Pashto translations of European terms as he had for Persian. However, Tarzi continued to publish his newspaper in Dari-Persian so that it might continue to sound the "call for Muslim independence ... and a collective Muslim struggle against the Russian and British attempts at colonizing Muslim territory" (p. 50-52).

In just this small example we see a country trying to be both an independent entity and a vocal member of an international community. This tension plays out again and again in each of the essays. *Afghanistan in Ink* is the first book of its kind to treat the region with the depth and subtlety necessary for a reader to properly learn something, and one hopes that those who pick up the reins will continue to put as much care into their work as those who contributed here.

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