

# PERSIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

## **Course Description**

This course covers autobiographical writings in Persian from premodern times to contemporary Iran. It reflects the emergence of autobiographical writing in the first days of Islam and an evolving sense of self, identity, and cultural cohesion, and then records transitions within the political / economic power structures in the geographical region. In addition, travel literature and perceptions of "otherness" are recorded, as well as gender roles, and politics.

## **About the Professor**

This course was prepared by Rebecca Gould, Assistant Professor, Yale and Singapore National University.

## **Course Content**

### **Unit 1— Narrating the Self in Premodern Persia (weeks 1-2)**

(Avicenna, Naser-i Khusrow)

### **Unit 2— The Mughal Reinvention of Self-Narrative (weeks 3-7)**

(Babur, Gulbadan Begum, Mir Muhammad Taqi Mir, Tahmas Beg Khan Bahadur)

### **Unit 3—Writing the Self in Iranian Modernity (weeks 8-14)**

(Bibi Khanum Astarabadi, Taj al-Sultanah, Ayni, Lahuti, Jamalzadah, Sairafizadah)

### Required Texts:

1. Best edition: Avicenna, *The Life of Ibn Sina: A Critical Edition and Annotated Translation*. Trans. William E. Gohlman (Albany: SUNY Press, 1974). Cheaper editions: "Life of a Philosopher," in A. J. Arberry, *Aspects of Islamic Civilization* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1967), 136-146; A. J. Arberry, *Avicenna on Theology* (Hyperion Press, 1979), 9-24.
2. Naser Khosrow, *Safar Nameh* Trans. W. M. Thackston (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1986).
3. Zahiruddin Babur, *Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*. Translated from the Chaghatay Turkish by W. M. Thackston (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). (This work was best known in its Persian translation, made by the Mughal patron Abdur Rahim Khañ Khañāñ).
4. Best edition: Gulbadan Begum, "Humayunnama," in *Three Memoirs Of Humayun* (Bibliotheca Iranica, Intellectual Traditions Series, 2009), 1-68. Trans. W. M. Thackston. Cheaper online edition: *Humāyūn-Nama: The History of Humāyūn*. Trans. Annette S. Beveridge (New Delhi: Goodword, 2001 [1902]); <http://archive.org/details/historyofhumayun00gulbrich>.
5. Mir Muhammad Taqi Mir, *Zikr-i-Mir, The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet*, Translated, annotated and with an introduction by C.M. Naim (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).
6. Tahmas Beg Khan Bahadur, *Tahmas Nama: The Autobiography of a Slave*, abridged and trans. by P. Setu (Lahore: Panjab University, 1986).
7. Taj al-Sultanah, *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess from the Harem to Modernity, 1884-1914*, Trans. Anna Vanzan and Amin Neshati; Ed. Abbas Amanat (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 1993).
8. Bibi Khanum Astarabadi, "The Vices of Men," in *The Education of Women and The Vices of Men: Two Qajar Tracts*. Trans. Hasan Javadi and Willem Floor (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2010).
8. Sadriddin Aini, *The Sands of Oxus: Boyhood Reminiscences of Sadriddin Aini* Trans. John R. Perry and Rachel Lehr (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, Bibliotheca Iranica, 1998).
9. Abdul Qāsim Lahuti, "About Myself," *Soviet Literature Monthly* (Moscow: Writers Union of the USSR, 1954), 138-44. (Will be provided to students).
10. Muhammad 'Ali Jamalzadah, *Isfahan is Half the World: Memories of a Persian Boyhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
11. Said Sayrafiezadeh, *When Skateboards Will Be Free: A Memoir of a Political Childhood* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

### Recommended Overviews of Persian Literary History:

*General Introduction to Persian Literature*, ed. J.T.P. De Bruijn (London: IB Tauris, 2008).

Kamran Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

Nabi Hadi, *Dictionary of Indo-Persian literature* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1995).

A. J. Arberry, *Classical Persian Literature* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958).

Reuben Levy, *Persian Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1923).

Muhammad Abdul Ghani, *A History of Persian Language & Literature at the Mughal Court* (Allahabad: The Indian Press, 1929-1930). (Three volumes.)

### **Recommended Overviews of Islamic Autobiographical Traditions:**

*Interpreting the Self: Autobiography in the Arabic Literary Tradition*, Dwight Fletcher Reynolds and Kristen Brustad, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). (Only the introduction is required, but entire book is recommended).

*Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing*, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2007).

Al-Hassan Golley, Nawar. *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story* (Austin: Texas UP, 2003).

*Many Ways of Speaking about the Self: Middle Eastern Ego-documents in Arabic, Persian and Turkish (14th-20<sup>th</sup> Century)*, Ralf Elger and Yavuz Köse, eds. (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010). For an analysis of a Persian autobiography, see Barbara Stöcker-Parnian, "An Unusually Long Way to the Kaaba: Reflexions in the *Safarnāma-ye Makka* of Mehdīqolī Hedāyat," 103-116.

*Women's Autobiographies in Contemporary Iran*, Afsaneh Najmabadi, ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1990).

*Writing the Self: Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, Robin Ostle, Stefan Wild, eds. (London: Saqi Books, 1998).

## Writing Assignments

### Essay One—Due Week 5—1,000 words

How do Ibn Sina and Nasir Khusrow go about the task of representing their personal development against the background of their social milieus? Do these two texts suggest a continuous burgeoning autobiographical tradition in Persian? Where do you detect the authors' dependency on Arabic traditions? Does Reynolds' description of the characteristics of the early Arabic autobiographical tradition conform to the evidence from Persian narratives?

### Essay Two—Due Week 10—1,000 words

All the texts read in this unit (by Babur, Gulbadan Begum, Mir Muhammad Taqi Mir, Tahmas Beg Khan Bahadur) were composed in early modern Mughal South Asia. Does their geographic proximity to one another lend any other kinds of continuities to their diverse narratives? How does the perspective of the court differ from the perspectives of the poet and prisoner-of-war? How do these authors—all of whom are writing in a language that is not native to them—relate the Persian literary tradition? Reading these texts in translation, can you detect any differences in the early modern Indo-Persian style as compared to medieval Central Asian Persian (of Ibn Sina and Nasir Khusrow)?

### Essay Three—Due Week 15—3,000 words

#### Option One:

Comment on the difference between memoir (*khatirat*, *zikir*) and autobiography in Persian literary history. Do the authors who are primarily fiction writers and memoirists, such as Jamalzade and Sayrafiezadeh, conceive of the passage of time differently than those authors, such as Mir Taqi Mir and Ayni, who are primarily poets? How does travel affect the representation of the passage of time in Nasir Khusrow's *Safar Nama*, or in the court chronicles of Babur and Gulbadan Begum? You are free to draw on your knowledge of autobiographical traditions in other cultures, but make sure to discuss at least two works on the syllabus.

#### Option Two:

Consider the role of women's writings in Persian autobiography. How does the female voice differ from the male voice in the texts we have read in class? A particularly rich area of inquiry would be a consideration of the relation between political awareness and gender, a theme especially relevant to Bibi Khanum Astarabadi, Taj al-Sultanah, Sayrafiezadeh, as well as to the early modern autobiographies. You may also wish to consider additional recent Iranian autobiographies, for example by Azar Nafisi (also see Dabashi's critique of this work), Azadeh Moaveni, Ashraf Pahlavi, Shirin Ebadi, Fatemeh Keshavarz, and as well as recent scholarly work by Motlagh and the Najmabadi edited volume (all referenced in the bibliography at the end).

#### Transliteration Guidelines:

You may use any system you want as long as you are consistent. The preferred systems for transliterating Arabic and Persian terms and names are the Library of Congress (LOC) <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpsa/romanization/persian.pdf> and the system used by the International Journal of Middle East Studies, available here: <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/ijmes/docs/TransChart.pdf>

*You will not be graded down solely due to inaccurate transliteration, but an accurate and consistent application of either the LOC or the IJMES transliteration system can definitely improve your grade.*

## UNIT ONE: NARRATING THE SELF IN PREMODERN PERSIA

### WEEK 1

Avicenna (c. 980-1037), "Life of a Philosopher" (Trans. Arberry).  
Dwight Fletcher Reynolds and Kristen Brustad, "A Thousand Years of  
Arabic Autobiography," in *Interpreting the Self*, pp. 17-106.

#### Introduction:

Abū 'Alī al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Sīnā is arguably the greatest philosopher of the Islamic world, and certainly the greatest philosopher to have come from the Persian-speaking Islamic world. So influential were his writings across the medieval world that he is one of the few Islamic philosophers whose name was Latinized, which has caused Ibn Sina to be known to Europe as Avicenna. Avicenna's magnum opus is the *Book of Healing* (*Kitab al-Shifa*).

Avicenna's self-narrative is commonly regarded as the inaugural text in the Islamic autobiographical tradition. Famously, it includes the moment when the aspiring philosopher discovered the writings of Aristotle in a book market in Bukhara. Avicenna's specification that his discovery of Aristotle was mediated by al-Fārābī makes of this autobiographical text an argument for the continuity of the Islamic philosophical tradition across the entire Islamic world, from Baghdad to Central Asia.

Avicenna was writing at a period in Islamic history when nearly all scholarly treatises were composed in Arabic, and this work is no exception. It is included here, as the first significant example of Persian autobiography, because the author was equally fluent in Persian and influential on the development of Persian literature and learning. In order to contextualize Avicenna's achievement within the history of Arabic autobiography and as an inaugural text in an emergent Persian tradition, this work is assigned together with Reynolds and Brustad, "A Thousand Years of Arabic Autobiography."

#### Questions:

What role does Avicenna's religious faith play in his intellectual awakening? Does Avicenna exaggerate, for example, when he claims to have read Aristotle's *Metaphysics* forty times (138) or not to have slept for eighteen months (137)? Do Avicenna's reflections on drinking and sexuality correspond to your perception of contemporary understandings of Islamic values? How does the author's self-portrayal appear staged or otherwise constructed with a view to impressing his readers?

#### Further Reading:

Lenn Evan Goodman, *Avicenna* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2005).

For translations of two of Avicenna's Persian quatrains, see E. G. Browne, *Literary History of Persia: From Ferdawsi to Sa'di* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1906), Vol. 2, 108-09, 267.

For an excellent general history of medieval Bukhara, see Richard Frye, *Bukhara: The Medieval Achievement* (Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, 1996).

## WEEK 2

Nasir Khusrow (1004–1078), *Safar Nameh*

### Introduction:

Nasir Khusrow was born into a family of landowners in the village of Qubadhiyan on the bank of the Oxus in Central Asia. After working for several years as an official in the city of Marv, he decided to set out on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1045. He later reported having received a dream that led to his conversion to the Ismaili faith (the same faith observed by Avicenna's father but rejected by his son). This conversion led Nasir Khusrow to Cairo, where he committed himself to the service of the Fatimid ruler, al-Mustansir bi'llah.

The result of Nasir's Khusrow's journey was an important travel narrative called *Safar Nama* (*Book of Travel*). Although Nasir Khusrow is best known for his poetry and mystical writings, the *Safar Nama* stands as one of the earliest Persian-language travel narratives and also as an early example of Persian literary prose. Nasir Khusrow was accompanied on this seven-year journey by his brother and a servant as they passed through Nishapur, Tabriz, Aleppo, Jerusalem, and Cairo. Although formally a travelogue, Nasir Khusrow's *Safar Nama* (*Book of Travel*) exhibits many of the features of the classical Islamic autobiography. The author records his journeys from his home in Badakhshan to Cairo and Azerbaijan. Along the way he meets people of many religions and dialects, and dwells with wonder on their differences.

*Safar Nama* is however as revealing for what it does *not* say as for what it says. Most substantial among these silences is the lack of any allusion to the author's reasons for travelling. Historians have subsequently established that Nasir Khusrow was travelling as an Ismaili, with the goal of converting Sunni Muslims to his faith.

### Questions:

How, if at all, does Nasir Khusrow's religious mission shape the tone of his writing? How does Nasir Khusrow represent cultural differences between Persians from Tajikistan and elsewhere in the Persian speaking world? How does Nasir Khusrow's representations of the external world reflect his internal state. Who do you think was Nasir Khusrow's imagined audience?

### Further Reading:

Alice Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan: A Portrait of the Persian Poet, Traveller and Scholar* (London: IB Tauris, 2000).

Annemarie Schimmel, *Make a Shield from Wisdom: Selected Verses from Nāṣir-i Khusraw's Dīvān* (London: IB Tauris, 2001).

## UNIT TWO: THE MUGHAL REINVENTION OF SELF-NARRATIVE

### WEEKS 3 AND 4

Zahiruddin Babur (1483-1530), *Memoirs of Babur*

#### Introduction:

The *Baburnama*, as it is known in Persian, or *Events in the Life of Babur (Vaḡā'i-i Bābar)*, as it was called in its original Chaghatay (Central Asian) Turkic version, is one of the founding texts of early modern Persianate literary culture. Not coincidentally, its author was the founder of the Mughal dynasty (1526-1707), which ruled the entire breadth of South Asia prior to colonialism. The text has had an especially prodigious history, as it was copied, translated (into Persian), and imitated by later Mughal rulers.

The *Baburnama* is particularly striking for its representation of early modern cultural difference. The attempts of a sixteenth century Muslim ruler to make sense of a non-Muslim environment involve many comical moments, such as when Babur lashes out against the grapes and watermelons of "Hindustan" (the Persian term for India).

More recently, Babur's legacy has become highly controversial in contemporary India because it is believed that the site of a Babri Masjid (Babur Mosque), a mosque built by him in the Hindu holy city of Benares, was formerly the site of a Hindu temple. The violence that ensued over the movement to destroy the many-centuries old mosque resulted in the deaths of many thousands of Indian civilians as well as in major riots in Gujarat. This incident attests to the contemporary relevance of Babur's narrative of the conquest of Hindustan that accompanied his rise to power.

#### Questions:

What do you make of Babur's representations of conquest? What attitudes towards violence are enshrined in this narrative? How does Babur represent the attributes of sovereignty?

Do you agree with Salman Rushdie's claim that "the Western thinker whom Babur most resembles is his contemporary, the Florentine Niccolo Machiavelli" (p. xii)? Does *The Baburnama* text exhibit signs of the author's humanity (as in Babur's description of the fruits of Hindustan?). Contrast Stephen Dale's conception of Babur's "Steppe Humanism" with Rushdie's view of Babur as a Machiavellian politician.

#### Further Reading:

Salman Rushdie, "Introduction" to *The Baburnama*, pp. vii-xiii.

Amitav Ghosh, "The Man Behind the Mosque," *The Little Magazine* 1.2 (2000). Available online: <http://www.littlemag.com/2000/amitav.htm>.

*A Collection of Poems by the Emperor Babur* Trans. and Ed. E Denison Ross, Sir (Calcutta, Printed at the Baptist mission press, and pub. by the Asiatic society, 1910).

Stephen Dale, "Poetry and Autobiography in the Babur-nama," *Journal of Asian Studies* 53.3 (1996): 635-664.



Stephen Dale, "Steppe Humanism: The Autobiographical Writings of Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, 1483-1530," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22.1 (1990): 37-58.

Stephen Dale, *Garden of the Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

## WEEK 5

Gulbadan Begum (c.1523-1603), *The Book of Humayun*

### Introduction:

Daughter of Babur and aunt of the even more famous Akbar (r. 1556-1605), Gulbadan was situated at the very epicenter of Mughal power. Compared to her male counterparts, Gulbadan led a quiet life. The one major trip in her life, which she narrates at length in her autobiography, is the pilgrimage to Mecca that she organized for Shah Akbar's harem in 1578. As leader of the pilgrims, Gulbadan conducted negotiations with the Portuguese merchants for their passage, and otherwise engaged in tasks commonly reserved for men.

The Mughal period is well known for the series of autobiographies authored by Mughal kings (*padishahs*), beginning with Babur and culminating in Jahangir. *Humayunnama* however is the only extant text by a woman associated with the Mughal court. The author's genealogy is recapitulated in the text. Just as the Gulbadan is the daughter of the founder of the Mughal Empire who composed the first Mughal autobiography, so is the *Humayunnama* a fitting successor to the *Baburnama*. These genealogical linkages do not however prevent Gulbadan's values from differing radically from that of her father. Whereas Babur narrates conquest, Gulbadan laments the deaths of her family members, and interweaves these climactic narratives with the sorrows and joys of daily domestic life at the Mughal court.

As with so many autobiographies, an important aspect of this text is its reception history. The text was virtually ignored until Annette Beveridge, wife of the Orientalist John Beveridge, decided to translate and publish it. (Beveridge earlier produced the first translation of Babur's memoirs into English.) Although outdated by contemporary scholarly standard, Beveridge's translation stands as a lasting monument to a modern woman's attempt to give a new life to the suppressed voice of a premodern woman.

### Questions:

How would you describe Gulbadan's authorial tone in relation to the tone of her nephew, Babur? Could this text plausibly have been called *Gulbadannama (Narrative of Gulbadan)*? How does the nominal dedication of the text to her brother Humayan affect its narrative focus? What role does travelling play in this narrative in terms of establishing the authority of various characters?

### Further Reading:

Annette S. Beveridge, Introduction to *The History of Humāyūn*, 1-81.

Radhika Seshan, "The Public and the Private: Gulbadan Begum and Nur Jahan," *Medieval India, Problems and Possibilities: Essays in Honour of Professor A.R. Kulkarni* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2006), 281-295.

Ruby Lal, "Historicizing the Harem: The Challenge of a Princess's Memoir," *Feminist Studies* 30.3 (2004): 590-616.

Ruby Lal, "A genealogy of the Mughal harem," in *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 25-49.

For a contemporaneous European perspective on the Mughal court by someone who met Gulbadan, see: J. S. Hoyland (trans.) and S. N. Banerjee (ed.), *The Commentary of Father Monserrate, S. J. On his Journey to the Court of Akbar* (London, 1922).

Rebecca Gould, "How Gulbadan Remembered: The *Book of Humāyūn* as an Act of Representation," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6 (2011): 121-127.

## WEEK 6

Mir Muhammad Taqi Mir (1723–1810), *Zikr-i-Mir*

### Introduction:

Born in Agra (a former capital of Mughal India), to a family of Arab origin, Mir Muhammad Taqi Mir was one of the most important poets to have written in the twilight of the Mughal Empire. After his father's death at the age of seventeen, Mir Muhammad Taqi Mir (who went by the *takhalluṣ* Mir) moved to Delhi, where he lived with the eminent critic Siraj al-Din Ali Khan Arzu. After the deaths of his daughter, son, and wife, Mir grew sick and died. According to one of his eighteenth century biographers, four hundred people attended his funeral, quite a large number for a Delhi in the midst of chaotic upheaval.

Just as Avicenna, though a native speaker of Persian, chose to write his autobiography in Arabic because Arabic was the preeminent language of scholarship, so did Mir, though a native speaker of Urdu (called at the time Rekhta, Hindi, or Hindui), choose to write his autobiography in Persian, the preeminent language of scholarship in Mughal India. Best known for his Urdu ghazals (lyrics) and masnavis (narrative poems), Mir also composed a small number of Persian ghazals, quatrains, and a masnavi expressing his longing for Delhi.

*Zikr-i-Mir*, the Persian title of this autobiography, is evocative of the Arabo-Persian genre of biographical dictionaries (*tazkira*) through which poet's lives and works have been catalogued since the ninth century. The significant difference between Mir's autobiography and the *tazkira* genre is that this text is devoted to the life of a single author.

### Questions:

With the help of the map in Naim's translation of this text (p. 22), plot Mir's travels across India. How widely travelled was he for an intellectual of his era? Where is the influence of the *tazkira* genre reflected in Mir's text? How does the poet narrate his rivalry with other poets? Given that Mir's first language for speaking and writing was Urdu, does he appear entirely at home in his adopted language for the entirety of his life narrative?

### Further Reading:

C.M. Naim, Introduction to *Zikr-i-Mir*, pp. 1-24.

For an excellent example of the *tazkira* genre, see: Muhammad Husain Azad, *Ab-e Hayat: Shaping the Canon of Urdu Poetry*. Trans. and Ed. Frances W. Pritchett and S. R. Faruqi (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2001; corrected online version:

<http://dsal.uchicago.edu/books/PK2155.H8413/>). The entry on Mir is available here:  
[http://dsal.uchicago.edu/books/PK2155.H8413/194220d3.html#poet\\_miir](http://dsal.uchicago.edu/books/PK2155.H8413/194220d3.html#poet_miir)

For further on the tazkira genre, see J. Stewart-Robinson, "The Tezkere Genre in Islam," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 23.1 (1964): 57-65 (focuses on Ottoman Turkish literature, but relevant to the Persianate tradition).

*Mir Taqi Mir: Selected Poetry* trans. and intro. K. C., Kanda, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1997).

C. M., Naim, "'Mir and his Patrons' and 'Mir on his Patrons'," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 14 (1999): 85-95.

C. M., Naim, "'Mir in 'Fact' and Fiction," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 24 (2009): 4-15

## WEEK 7

Tahmas Beg Khan Bahadur (d. 1802), *Tahmas Nama*

### Introduction:

Born in Ottoman territories to an Armenian or Kurdish family, Tahmas Beg was captured in his infancy by the army of the Afsharid ruler Nadir Shah (r. 1736-1747). He was raised at the court of the governor of Punjab Mu'in al-Mulk (Mir Mannu), who trained him for military service. After Mu'in al-Mulk's death, Tahmas Beg accompanied his master's widow from Sirhind to Delhi, where they settled for several years. The ruler at that time, Shah 'Alam, was so impressed by the former slave that he conferred on him a royal title. Tahmas Beg's son, Rangin, became one of the first Urdu journalists and a prominent poet.

The *Tahmas Nama* (c. 1779) is distinct from the other works read in this class inasmuch as it is authored by a former slave. The author draws on Persian historiographic traditions to narrate his own experience of being taken captive by the Mughal army and serving in the Shah's retinue.

Although its author was trained to battle against Sikh rebels, *Tahmas Nama* is notable for the detailed and sympathetic accounts it provides of Sikh rebellions against Mughal rule (see for example the observation that rebellious Sikhs who were captured in battle were "beaten with wooden mallets and killed" [19]). Perhaps because he was himself a victim of military brutality, Tahmas Beg differs from Babur, who regards the brutality of his conquest as proof of his military and moral strength, and is ambivalent towards violence. He does not clearly sympathize with one side over the other.

### Questions:

How does the author represent his childhood? Does he remember his kidnapping, or is he fictionalizing his narrative? How does Tahmas Beg represent violent conquest, as compared to Padishah Babur? Is the difference between Tahmas Beg's representation of conquest and that of his more militant predecessors traceable to the circumstances of his life?

### Further Reading:

Indrani Chatterjee, Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Slavery and South Asian History* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2006).

Nabi Hadi, *Dictionary Of Indo-Persian Literature*, 584.

"Tahmasnamah," *The Sikh Encyclopedia*. Available online:  
<http://www.thesikhencyclopedia.com/writings-by-non-sikhs-on-sikhs-and-punjab/tahmasnamah>.

## UNIT THREE: WRITING THE SELF IN IRANIAN MODERNITY

### WEEK 8

Bibi Khanum Astarabadi (1858-1921), *The Vices of Men*

#### Introduction:

Born to a military father and to a mother who worked as a tutor in the household of Nasir al-Din Shah (r. 1848-1896), Bibi Khanum received an unusually rich education for a woman of her time. In 1906, after having borne seven children (two of whom were girls), and spent decades as a writer, she established one of Iran's first school for girls in her Tehran home. Her husband, Musa Vaziri, whose character she details in her autobiography, was a prominent official in the Persian Cossack Brigade. Two of her daughters, Maulud and Khadija, became activists for women's rights; another son, Hasan 'Ali Vaziri, became a painter, and a second son, 'Ali Naqi Vaziri, became a famous master of Iranian music.

Bibi Khanum wrote *The Vices of Men* (1894) in reply to *Disciplining Women* (c. 1880's), a treatise that argued that women should order their lives according to their husbands' desires. As she notes in the text, she had been encouraged by her female friends to write this work, but it is also evident that Astarabadi's life experiences, and in particular her troubled marriage, gave her an acute perspective on gender relations. The strictly autobiographical portion of *The Vices of Men* is confined to the end, in the concluding chapter entitled "An Episode of My Life" (117-126).

Discovered rotting away in Tehran's Parliamentary Library (*Kitabkhana-i Majlis Shura-i Milli*), *The Vices of Men* was not published until over a century after its composition. Soon after its Persian publication in 1992, and increasingly with the publication of its English translation in 2010, the text has come to be regarded as one of the first comprehensive statements of Iranian feminism.

#### Questions:

Why does Bibi Khanum reserve the story of her life to the end of the text? Discuss the sharp contrast between the self-abnegating opening of *The Vices of Men* and the far more assertive and critical statement concerning the flaws of *Disciplining Women* as the text progresses? How might the gradual unfolding of Bibi Khanum's views on the subject of gender relations be tied to previous literary precedents? Does the form through which Bibi Khanum's views unfold affect the content of her beliefs?

#### Further Reading:

Persian text of *The Vices of Men* (*Ma'ayib al-rijal*) with brief introduction on the site, "Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran," <http://www.qajarrowomen.org/en/items/1018A17.html>

Hasan Javadi, "Introduction," in *The Education of Women and The Vices of Men: Two Qajar Tracts*, ix-xxv.

Shahrzad Mojab, "Theorizing the Politics of 'Islamic Feminism'," *Feminist Review* 69 (Winter 2001): 124-146.

Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: U. of California Press, 2005).

Shahla Haeri, *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shī'i Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1989).

## WEEK 9

Taj al-Sultanah (1884-1936), *Crowning Anguish (Memoirs)*

### Introduction:

As the daughter of Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar, the ruler for whose wife Bibi Khanum Astarabadi's mother worked, Taj al-Sultanah was privy to the machinations of power at the highest levels. And yet her privileged location did not prevent her from viewing the court with a critical eye. Originally married to a Qajar notable through an arranged marriage, she ended by obtaining a divorce. Faced with the restrictions on women's education typical of her time, Taj al-Sultanah educated herself through readings in European history, philosophy, and politics. During the Constitutional Period (1905-1906), Taj al-Sultanah joined a political movement, *The Society for Women's Freedom (Anjoman-i Azadi-ye Zanan)*. Her self-narrative ends at the point when she is in her mid-thirties, and very little is known about her subsequent life or the circumstances of her death.

Like *Humayunnama*, Taj al-Sultanah's *Memoirs (Khāterāt)* is a singular exemplar of its kind: a female-authored account of life at the royal court. To a much greater extent than Gulbadan, however, Taj al-Sultaneh devotes her text to representing herself. Taj al-Sultanah inveighs against the restrictions on women's education, women's fragility, and problems in the contemporary institution of motherhood.

Like Gulbadan's *Humayunnama* and Bibi Khanum Astarabadi's *The Vices of Men*, Taj al-Sultanah's *Memoirs* remained unpublished and unstudied for many years following her death. Immediately after its publication in 1969, scholars began to doubt the authenticity of the text.

### Questions:

How do you explain the contrast between Gulbadan's self-effacing self-representation and Taj al-Sultanah's predilection for boasting? Have gender roles evolved so significantly over the course of three centuries? Who do you think Taj al-Sultanah was writing for?

### Further Reading:

Abbas Amanat, "The Changing World of Taj al-Sultana," 9-104.

Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Tāj-al-Saltāna," *Encyclopedia Iranica*. Available online: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/taj-al-saltana>.

Afsaneh Najmabadi, "A Different Voice: Tāj os-Saltāna," in *Women's Autobiographies in Contemporary Iran*, ed. Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, 1990), 17-31.

Shireen Mahdavi, "Taj al-Saltaneh, an Emancipated Qajar Princess," *Middle Eastern Studies* 23.2 (1987): 188-93.

Anna Vanzan, "The Memoirs of Taj al-Saltaneh: A Window onto the Qajar Period," *Iranshenasi* 2.4 (1991): 91-107.

Badr-al-Moluk Bāmdād, *From Darkness to Light: Women's Emancipation in Iran*, Trans. F. R. C. Bagley (Hicksville, NY: Exposition Press, 1977).

### WEEK 10 AND 11

Sadriddin Ayni (1878-1954), *The Sands of Oxus*  
Abolqāsem Lahūtī (1887-1957), "About Myself"

#### Introduction:

Sadr al-Din Ayni, the most prominent writer of Soviet Tajikistan, was born into a poor family of carpenters in the village of Sokhtare, near the ancient city of Bukhara (present-day Uzbekistan), near which Avicenna was also born. When he decided to become a writer, Sadr al-Din following the Persian tradition of adopting a meaningful pseudonym. <sup>6</sup>*Ayn*, Sadr al-Din's term of choice, means origin, spring, and eye. An active member in the reformist Jadid movement, Ayni was imprisoned in his youth for his revolutionary activities during the period when Bukhara was still ruled by the Islamic Emirate. The Soviet revolution seemed to him to mark the dawn of a new era of liberation. Among his many contributions to the Tajik language, Ayni was influential in devising a new Latin script that was in use for the language until 1938, when Latin was replaced by Cyrillic. Rather ironically, however, Ayni himself persisted until the end of his life in using the Arabo-Persian script to write Tajik. Ayni's divided affiliations with respect to the Tajik alphabet are echoed in his other oscillations between tradition and modernity in other domains of his literary life.

The text assigned for this course is the first volume in Ayni's four-volume memoirs (*Yoddoshtho*). Previously translations of the text into English have been made only with reference to the Russian version, so Perry's edition is a landmark achievement. Ayni wrote his memoirs at the end of his life; he uses them to construct a profile of himself as writer as well as an individual. The frequent authorial notes and allusions to his own writing set the *Memoirs* apart from all the texts we have read so far, with the possible exception of Mir Muhammad Taqi Mir's autobiography.

Like every Soviet intellectual who managed to survive the purge, Ayni's life was a constant effort to reconcile the injunction to censorship with his creative imagination. A prolific fiction writer, critic, and poet, Ayni wrote his memoirs in four volumes close to his death.

While Ayni was born to a carpenter who was burdened with his awareness of his limited education, Abolqāsem Lahūtī was born to an almost illiterate carpenter, who was nonetheless a poet respected by his community. He grew up in an Iran on the brink of a revolution (known in Iranian historiography as *mashrutiiyeh*, literally the constitutional movement) that would end with a temporary victory in the successful limitation of the monarch's power. Inspired by the Soviet revolution, Lahuti immigrated from Moscow in 1923, after Reza Shah (the ruler who put an end to the period of relative freedom in Iranian history) had declared him persona non grata. Aside from a brief stay in Tajikistan's capital city Dushanbe—renamed Stalinabad at the time of his writing—Lahuti spent the remainder of his life in Moscow as a translator of Russian and world literature into Persian.

Nearly every major Soviet writer was invited to compose autobiographical sketches of the sort Lahuti offers here. Ayni and Lahuti's texts are brought together here because they partake of the same socio-historical transformations, bearing witness to the replacement of tradition-bound elitism with Soviet notions of equality and the brotherhood of nations. Equally, Ayni and Lahuti so powerfully evoke a world on the brink of decay that their narratives bring to light all that was lost in the Soviet experiment that both authors helped to implement through their collaborations with the regime.

### Questions:

Ayni's text is the second text we are reading by a poet whose uses the autobiographical genre to explore his literary maturation. How does the author's literary sensibility distinguish his text from the autobiographies of Avicenna, Babur, and Gulbadan? Nasir Khusrow was also a poet but he does not reflect on the writing of poetry in his travel narrative. How do you explain this difference between the premodern and modern text? How does Ayni situate himself in relation to classical Persian literature? How does Ayni negotiate Soviet censorship? In introducing his text, Ayni writes: "I built this house from bricks of ancient clay, / To honor in it those who've passed away" (28). What do you make of the frequent references to building and houses in this narrative? Does it allude in part to the ancestral occupation of Ayni's family?

Ayni and Lahuti's autobiographies share in common with *Tahmas Nama* the narrative vantage point of a non-elite social class. How is the representation of class conflict similar and different in these three texts?

Do Ayni and Lahuti relate to their Persian literary predecessors in the same way?

### Further Reading:

John Perry, "Introduction," *The Sands of Oxus*, 1-26.

Becka, Jiri. "Traditional Schools in the Works of Sadriddin Aini and Other Writers of Central Asia," *Archiv Orientalni* 39 (1971): 284-321.

Jiri Becka, *Sadriddin Ayni Father of Modern Tajik Culture* (Naples: Instituto Universitario Orientale Seminario Di Studi Asiatici Series Minor V, 1980).

Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

## WEEK 12 AND 13

Muhammad 'Ali Jamalzadah (1892-1997),  
*Isfahan is Half the World*

### Introduction:

Regarded as the founder of the Persian short story, Mohammad-Ali Jamālzādeh was born in Isfahan to a middle class family and educated in Lebanon and Europe. He passed his adolescence in Lebanon, where he attended a Catholic school, after which he moved to Switzerland to study law. Jamalzade's first successful short story was "Persian is sweet (Farsi shikar ast)," which was reprinted in *One Upon a Time (Yeki Bud va Yeki Nabud)*, a short story collection regarded as one of the most important contributions to twentieth century Persian literature. In between his prolific original writings and translations from

English, German, and French, Jamalzade spent two decades working in the International Labour Office in Geneva and teaching Persian at the University of Geneva, during which he made brief trips back to his homeland. Jamalzade died at the age of 105 years in Geneva, where he is buried.

*Once Upon a Time* opens with a manifesto that, against a tradition that had traditionally elevated poetry over prose, argues that prose is vital to a nation's literature. Upon its publication, *Once Upon a Time* captured the reading public's attention due to its innovative prose style, its use of colloquial Persian, its modern diction, as well as for its satire of Persian society, the boldness of which recalls the writings of Bibi Khanum Astarabadi and anticipates the satire of Sayrafiezadeh.

Just as Bukhara was the center of intellectual life in the worlds in which Ibn Sina and Sadr al-Din Ayni circulated, so was Isfahan a centerpiece of Iran's cultural achievements. However, this was a world that Jamalzadeh was compelled to know largely at a distance, due to his permanent exile from his homeland from the age of twelve onwards. Jamalzadeh's physical estrangement from his homeland infuses his childhood memoirs with particular poignancy.

### Questions:

Why do both Ayni and Jamalzadeh devote such a substantial portion of their narratives to narrating their childhoods? What role does nostalgia play in the autobiographies of Ayni and Jamalzadeh? What role does exile play in Jamalzadeh's ability to reflect on his life growing up in Iran? How is the sartorial metaphor implicit in the Iranian title (*The Beginning and End of a Web, or the Book of Esfahan*) reflected in the book's narrative arc and how do its implications differ from the English version?

### For Further Research:

H. Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966), 91-112

"Djamalzadeh [a] famous Iranian Writer," (Jamalzadeh at the age of 102, conversing in Persian and French), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0WeowkCqFs>

"Djamalzadeh in the Parc," (Jamalzadeh conversing in French in a park in Geneva) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6zPJkTj-w&feature=relmfu>.

## WEEK 14

Said Sayrafiezadeh (b. 1968), *When Skateboards Will Be Free*

### Introduction:

Born in Brooklyn, New York, to an Iranian dissident father and an American Jewish mother nine years prior to the Iranian revolution, Said Sayrafiezadeh is currently a playwright residing in New York City. The critically acclaimed autobiography *When Skateboards Will Be Free* (2009) is his first book.

*When Skateboards Will Be Free* chronicles the fate of the communist party in the late twentieth century United States from the unusual perspective of a child of two ill matched leftist activists. Even as it demonstrates fascinating parallels between the dissident



movements in Iran and the United States, the author explains his own gradual disenchantment with political life.

While Lahuti tells the story of how Iranian hopes for a free society were awakened by the Soviet Revolution, Sayrafiezadeh tells precisely the opposite narrative. On his account, the communist party inculcated its own forms of repressions, such as requiring all party members to quit their jobs and take up blue-collar occupations (80). Sayrafiezadeh's memoir details the author's rebellion against such repressions.

### **Questions:**

To what extent is Sayrafiezadeh conscious of working within a Persian tradition? How does Sayrafiezadeh balance his American Jewish with his Iranian identity? What influence does Sayrafiezadeh's uncle's literary success have on the author's determination to become a writer? How is the overthrow of Mossadeq by the CIA perceived by the Americans in Sayrafiezadeh's autobiography? How does the author perceive this event? What narrative gains are made by the juxtaposition of an American Jewish perspective with an Iranian one? Of all the works read in this course, *When Skateboards Will Be Free* is probably the one with the strongest sense of humor. What are some of the humorous moments in Sayrafiezadeh's narrative? Consider the ironies that lace the author's humorous narrations of the major events in his life.

### **Further Reading:**

Author's interview concerning his autobiography: Said Sayrafiezadeh, "Growing up in the Socialist Workers Party," <http://www.bookpod.org/growing-up-in-the-socialist-workers-party/>.

Said Sayrafiezadeh's website: <http://www.sayrafiezadeh.com/SaidSayrafiezadeh.html>.

Dwight Garner, "'Das Kapital' as a Boy's Bedtime Story," (Review of *When Skateboards Will Be Free*), *New York Times*: [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/01/books/01garn.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/01/books/01garn.html?_r=1).

For general historical background on US-Iran relations in the modern era: Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2003).

### **Recommended Readings for Papers and Further Research on Persian Autobiography:**

Azadeh Agah, Sousan Mehr, and Shadi Parsi, eds. *We Lived To Tell: Political Prison Memoirs of Iranian Women* (Toronto: McGilligan Books, 2007).

Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in The Age of Discoveries, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), esp. Chapter 4, pp. 130-174, on "The Ocean of Wonders" by Mahmud bin Amir Balkhi.

ʿAlī Yazdī Sharaf al-Dīn, *The History of Timur-Bec, known by the name of Tamerlain the Great, Emperor of the Moguls and Tartars*. Translated from French into English by John Darby (London: Bartholomew Close 1723).

Bhimsen, *Memoirs of Bhimsen relating to Aurangzib's Deccan campaigns* in *Sir Jadunath Sarkar birth centenary commemoration volume*, ed. Vithhala Gopala Khobrekar (Bombay: Dept. of Archives, Maharashtra, 1972).

Marilyn Booth, "Women's prison memoirs in Egypt and elsewhere: Prison, gender and praxis." *Middle East Report* 17.6 (1987): 35-41.

Hamid Dabashi, "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire," *Al-Ahram Weekly Online*, 1-7 June 2006, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/797/special.htm>.

Shirin Ebadi, *Iran Awakening: One Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her Life and Country* (New York: Random House, 2007).

Babak Elahi, "Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women's Memoirs," *Iranian Studies* 39.4 (2006): 461-80.

Babak Elahi, "Frames and Mirrors in Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*," *symploke* 15.1-2 (2007): 312-325.

Nawal El-Sa'adawi, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* Trans. Marilyn Booth (London: The Women's Press, 1991).

Emin Joseph Emin, *The Life and Adventures of Emin Joseph Emin, An Armenian, 1726-1809. Written by Himself. Second Edition with Portrait, Correspondence, Reproductions of Original Letters and Map*. Edited by Amy Apcar (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1918).

Mawlavi M. Hidayat Husain, "The Persian Autobiography of Shah Waliullah bin Abd al-Rahim al-Dehlavi," *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal New Series* Vol. 8 (1912): 161-175.

Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India* Trans. by Wheeler M. Thackston (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, 1999).

Jawhar [servant of Emperor Humāyūn], *The Tezkereh al vakiāt: or, Private memoirs of the Moghul Emperor Humāyūn* Trans. Charles Stewart (London: Oriental Translation Fund of Great Britain and Ireland, 1832).

Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than "Lolita" in Tehran* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Nastaran Kherad, *In the House of Bibi: Growing up in Revolutionary Iran* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2008).

Abd Allah Mustawfi, *The Administrative and Social History of The Qajar Period: The Story of My Life* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1997).

Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).

Amy Motlagh, "Autobiography and Authority in the Writings of the Iranian Diaspora," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31.2 (2011): 411-424.

Negar Mottahedeh, "Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War," *Middle East Report*, September 2004, [www.merip.org/mero/interventions/mottahedeh\\_interv.html](http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/mottahedeh_interv.html).

Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2003).

Ashraf Pahlavi, *Faces in a Mirror: Memoirs from Exile* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980) [recollections by the sister of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi].

Nahid Rachlin, *Persian Girls: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

Heydar Radjavi, *French Hats in Iran* (Washington DC: Mage, 2011).

Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* Trans. Mattais Ripa and Blake Ferris (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).

Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* Trans. Anjali Singh (New York: Pantheon, 2004).

Zohreh Sullivan, *Exiled Memories: Stories of the Iranian Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2001).

Shams-i Tabrizi, *Me & Rumi: The Autobiography of Shams-i Tabrizi* Trans. William Chittick (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2004).

## **Brief Glossary of Terms Pertaining to Persian Autobiographical Traditions**

*You are encouraged to use these terms in your papers  
and to discuss the nuances in their deployments in different texts.*

*khaterat*—memoirs, a common Persian term for autobiography in the early modern and modern period.

*tazkira*—genre of biographical dictionary that influenced the autobiographical tradition; derived from the Arabic root (z-k-r) meaning “memory”.

*shah*— the most common Iranian-Persian term for ruler; adopted by the Mughals, who were however of Central Asian Turkic descent.

*padishah*—same meaning as shah; the term for ruler most commonly used in Mughal India.

*takhalluṣ*—penname chosen by poets when they embark on a literary career; it frequently suggests an aspect of the poet’s chosen identity (e.g. Ayni for <sup>ʿ</sup>ayn meaning “source” or “original”).