

Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin Before Nationalism. Mana Kia. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. 336 pp. \$30. Paperback ISBN: 9781503611955.

Mana Kia's *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin Before Nationalism* focuses on civility (*adab*) as the primary identity maker in the Persianate region, in other words in the "Balkans to Bengal complex," in Shahab Ahmed's well-received term. As Kia announces in the book's title, this fluid identity based on proper conduct is contrasted with the rigid logic of modern nationalist identity that allows for but a single language, territory, and shared ethnicity. In order to focus on the fluidity of identity in the early modern Mughal Empire, Kia focuses on the time period between the fall of the Safavid Empire in 1722 and Macaulay's Minute of Education in 1835 that established English as the language of education in India. The year 1722 is important for the content of the book because this moment was a catalyst for renewed migration of texts and scholars from Iran, most of whom still lamented the loss of this homeland and its contribution to Persianate literary culture. Kia argues that until 1835, Persian was as much associated with Mughal intellegentsia as it was with the Iranian realm ruled by the former Safavid Empire.

Kia demonstrates the fluidity of identity in Mughal literary culture by focusing on a group of biographical and autobiographical texts that embodied moral community such as literary biographical dictionaries (*tazkirih*), travelogues, memoirs. *Persianate Selves* starts with two parts that consist of three chapters each. Throughout the first two parts, Kia argues that customary markers of identity—such as place of origin, blood ties, mother tongue—were entirely negotiable; the only indisputable criteria of inclusion in the Persianate world was one's mastery over norms of civility (*adab*). Kia's arguments about the key role of *adab* in framing early modern social mobility is well-conceived and important. A caveat, however, is that the argument is frequently overstated. The book assigns civility the power to overwrite existing social hierarchies. In reality, civility infrequently simply *legitimized* hierarchies established through other aspects of identity. Chapter Seven is arguably the strongest chapter in the book. Here, Kia synthesizes her findings in the first two parts and frames them with a noteworthy discussion of her main archive, namely biographical dictionaries (*tazkirihs*) and other commemorative sources as articulations of the boundaries and norms of moral communities. Cultural historians of the early modern world will benefit from this analysis, particularly the discussion around commemorative texts as embodiments of communal ethical ideals.

Of all the diverse array of components of identity and meaning making, language is clearly the most significant category in Kia's analysis. In fact, she states early on that her main aim in the book is to "disaggregate the Persian from Iran" (11). The importance of decoupling Persian language from Iranian national identity is evident through her semi-autobiographical coda as well as her emphasis on Persianate *adab* and its textual circulation throughout the book. In her project to question modern Iranian nationalism's claim over Persian, Kia is in good company. Muzaffar Alam's article, "The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan," and Cemal Kafadar's article, "A Rome of One's Own," both published in early 2000s, have emphasized the core place of the Persian language for Mughal and Ottoman cultural identities, respectively. One may add to this list the broader early modernist emphasis on multilingualism as the norm rather than exception in urban early modern contexts, hence challenging nationalism's insistence on unilingualism. Kia's call to decouple language and

ethnicity, therefore, is sure to be well received by early modernists. However, there are a number of issues arising from overgeneralization from specific findings and a lack of historical contextualization. Here, I discuss some of these issues by focusing on the author's use of the key concept "Persianate."

In the introduction, Kia follows Marshall Hodgson to define Persianate as "social and cultural formations associated with the Persian language" (13). This definition would require the author to ask the question: "Which cultural forms are associated with Persian *by eighteenth century authors* [emphasis added]?" However, no such discussion of specific cultural meanings of Persianate appear in the following pages. The author's use of the designation "Persianate" is unreflective and unjustified in many places; many of what Kia describes as Persianate would have been described as Mughal or Islamic by early modern actors. An example is Kia's description "Persianate geoculture," for a travelogue-cum-chronicle written in mid-eighteenth century (91). It is hard to imagine geographical descriptions or travel writing to have been particularly associated with the Persian language, and Kia does not elaborate on her choice of terminology. Is anything written in the Persian tongue Persianate, and if so why bother coining this term? The first problem with Kia's use of "Persianate," therefore, is conceptual murkiness resulting largely from lack of attention to Mughal conceptualizations of Persianate.

The second problem with "Persianate" in *Persianate Selves* is Kia's assumption that connectivity implies homogeneity, because people, texts, and contexts circulated in the Persianate zone, we may talk about a "whole Persianate" (193). This incorrect assumption begets two further issues. The first issue is the misrepresentation of the book's scope. Kia's book describes the Persianate as read, interpreted, and reconfigured by the Mughal elite in the eighteenth century, despite her repeated claims that her findings apply "across the Persianate" (124). This would have necessitated a thorough treatment of the Ottoman Empire, as well as Central Asia and Afghanistan, which is well beyond the scope of Kia's book. The second issue is the dismissal of early modern imperial traditions and their impacts on identity formation. One of the most focused scholarly enterprises of early modernists has been to delineate the intersections between the formation of centralized empires and their roles in creating distinct identities for their subjects, elite and commoner alike. These distinctions of civility *within* the Persianate are well documented. Take, for instance, the "mobility" of the Ottoman Prince Bayezid, who took refuge at the Safavid court in 1559. The prince's stay at the court of the neighboring Safavid Empire made for curious cultural encounters. Prince Bayezid's hosts at Tahmasp's palace did not appreciate his conduct, which was established upon the principle of royal detachment that required Bayezid to refuse to speak to his hosts or even to make eye contact with them. At the Ottoman court, these behaviors were taught to the prince as "proper conduct (*adab*)," as princely behaviour that honored both the universal virtues of gravitas and solemnity, and imperial etiquette that posited an existential hierarchy between the Ottoman ruling family and the rest of the world. Safavid court etiquette, however, demanded frequent public engagement and merriment. As a result, Safavid authors harshly judged Bayezid to be cold, haughty, and arrogant for refusing to join Shah Tahmasp in creating cultured dialogue. The encounter illustrates one fundamental truth about the early modern Persianate world: it was a world in which civility (*adab*) played a broad range of roles from enabling and framing contact to cementing difference or ritualizing hierarchy. Mobility allowed one to change loca-

tion, but it also required (as it did for Prince Bayezid) learning a new dialect of the Persianate when resettling in a new political climate.

In short, Kia's conception of the Persianate overlooks the heterogeneity within the Persianate zone, and this omission is a result of the disregard of a rich array of scholarship on empire and identity formation in the early modern period. To risk a slight anachronism, my point can be illustrated through the following example: we may all speak English and read Kipling (which makes us English-ate), yet identify as distinctly British, American, or Indian *while engaging* with the same exact text. More importantly, these different identifications may impact how we position ourselves vis-à-vis the shared text and thus produce different interpretations of it. Similar liberties must have been available to and exploited by readers engaging with the seventeenth century poetic giant Saib-i Tabrizi in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal realms. In fact, *Persianate Selves* contains many examples to the strength of early modern imperial associations in the making of cultural identity, from the emigré Iranian author who commemorated poets hailing from the former Safavid lands exclusively (180) to *adab's* embracing of the ethical principle that extolled a ruling dynasty "as the perfected representation of an entire realm" (57).

In the end, Kia's larger idea of bringing the early modern in dialogue with the modern in order to reflect on nationalism's essentialist assumptions is promising. However, we do not need to replace one form of essentialism with another one by adopting an unjustified oversimplification and idealization of the early modern period. In that spirit, potential readers of this book must keep in mind that this book is on the Mughal Persianate, rather than on a global Persianate, as claimed.

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