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Recasting American and Persian Literatures: Local Histories and Formative Geographies from Moby-Dick to Missing Soluch, Amirhossein Vafa, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, ISBN 978-3-319-40468-4, xv + 204 pp.

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Recasting American and Persian Literatures originates from Amirhossein Vafa's doctoral research project in which he makes a unique contribution to the Melvillian scholarly readings by focusing on the proleptic narrative of the Parsee Fedallah in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851). Since Persian and American readings have always disregarded the marginal but proleptic character of Fedallah, Vafa's book is ground-breaking against this. His argument is based on his appropriation of the term proleptic, which he defines as "the proactive anticipation of untold stories and repressed alternatives, which forms counter-narrative against dominant discourse" (Vafa, 2016, p. 18). Therefore, he reads *Moby-Dick* to listen to unheard stories and then visits Fedallah's ancestral homes, Iran, India and Palestine, to question narratives of domination and defiance. The overall mindset of the author is to highlight "the multiplicity of literary worlds", to destabilize the centre-periphery interlocution space and to rethink the traditional divide between East and West that World Literature tends to reiterate (p. 18).

Vafa is influenced by Dabashi's interrogation of the limitations in Edward Said's "defiant political engagement" and the limitations in Gayatri Spivak's

“critique of the European dismantling of the sovereign subject” (p. 12). The result is an agenda inclined towards polyphonic representations that no longer decentre merely by reversing the Western order, but rather aspire to heteroglossia and local voices. The book starts with the argument that Fedallah has more significance to the narrative than scholars such as Franco Moretti have noticed so far and makes his unheard voice audible by highlighting his unacknowledged influence upon Captain Ahab. Vafa then searches for Fedallah’s ethnic and cultural kin among Zoroastrian characters like Javid in Esmail Fassih’s *The Story of Javid* (1981) and Yezad in Rohinton Mistry’s *Family Matters* (2002), as well as his female defiant projections in the Muslim World of Mergan in Mahmoud Dowlatabadi’s *Missing Soluch* (1980) and the eponymous character in Ghassan Kanafani’s *Um Saad* (1969). The book ends with a discussion on the cinematic representation of a proleptic character in Amir Naderi’s *The Runner*. The argument is developed in five chapters.

Chapter one, “Toward a Reading of *Moby-Dick* Beyond Tehran”, is the introduction in which the author sets the grounds for the ways he departs from the “World Republic of Letters”. The author’s definition of world literature is influenced by a departure from Damrosch’s in that Vafa aims for a more democratic multiplicity of world literatures (p. 9). Referring to Aamir A. Mufti’s argument on the shaping forces in World literature, Vafa proposes a subversive “better close reading”: one that is aware of the hegemonic powers and “remaps aesthetic properties against the grain of local and global inequalities that inform institutions of national and world literatures” (p. 9). Therefore, his postcanonical approach dissolves the western and non-western packaging and relates the hypercanon supranationality of *Moby-Dick* to the countercanon marginality of *Missing Soluch*.

This subversive close reading enables the author to foreground the significance of the often neglected Fedallah against the grains of the narrative and the scholars. Vafa maintains that this Parsee has proleptic potentiality in a narrative that subdues him in the self-perpetuating moment of “Call me Ishmael”: the novel’s famous beginning (p. 24). Chapter One concludes with a “Rehearsal of the Argument” as Vafa hints at his technique in crossing the borders between

the Western representation of the Parsee Fedallah and the non-western male representations like Javid, non-western females like Mergan, as well as the visual translation, Amiru. This border-crossing allows Vafa to listen to otherwise untold/unheard stories of centre and periphery and question the ways the knowledge of World Literature and the World is reproduced.

Chapter Two, “Call Me Fedallah: Reading a Proleptic Narrative”, sets the ground for the author’s departure from the Cold-War readings of *Moby-Dick* by debunking the “prototypical national narrative” of the totalitarian Ahab and the American Ishmael by revisiting the Parsee Fedallah in the narrative. Withdrawing from Moretti’s claim that Fedallah is “an insignificant figure” (p. 44), Vafa ingeniously demonstrate that “there is more significance to Fedallah than a parenthesized incarnation of evil speechless against the Faustian Ahab or Ishmaelite America ”(p. 44). In other words, Ishmael’s narrative of survival costs Fedallah’s demise “by reducing him to an ‘unearthly voice’ and a dark ‘threat to the light of evangelical land’” (p. 49). Vafa believes Fedallah’s autonomy is denied in the narrative because of the bonds between him, as the spiritual leader, and the “old man” Ahab (p. 377). Therefore, the author’s reading against the grains reveals Fedallah’s textually resisting the epistemic violence that tries to silence him. In “Thus Spake Fedallah”, a subsection of Chapter Two, Vafa invites the reader to re-visit the Parsee’s proleptic narrative, finally materialized in the single coherent and intimate verbal exchange between him and Ahab: The Captain refuses to follow Fedallah’s warning to “take another pledge” when he has just recognized the inevitability of Fedallah’s first two prophecies (Melville, p. 377). Therefore, Fedallah is a proleptic character whose unheard defiance is unearthed by Vafa.

Chapter Three, “Call Him Javid: Limning a National Trope”, elaborates on Yezad’s crisis of identity in *Family Matters* and Javid’s crisis of masculinity in *The Story of Javid* and appropriates “the Parsee Fedallah as a literary catalyst visiting his Zoroastrian brethren” (Vafa, 2016, p. 101). Determined to unearth the struggles of Fedallah’s kins to save the crews, Vafa begins this chapter with a reference to an Indian Parsi’s philanthropic mission for his Zoroastrian fellows in Qajar Iran: Mankeji, whose belonging to the “prosperous Parsi diaspora” is an

antithesis to Yezad's marginality in post-independent India. When considered in the light of Tanya Luhrmann's observations on "the good Parsi", who shares the positive colonial attributes of Englishness, Yezad's crisis of identity becomes significant in his alienation from the Zoroastrian culture, as well as the decaying patriarch (p. 87).

Vafa relates Mystery's representation of Yezad's crisis of identity (as an angelized good Parsi minority in India) to Fassih's nostalgic depiction of Javid's crisis of masculinity (as a Persianized good Parsi minority in Iran). Yezad and Javid have the capacity to dismantle the canonical edifice with their different proleptic marginalities. Following Hamid Dabashi's critique of Jameson's national allegories, the book maintains that these non-Western Parsees "cultivate imaginative geographies of a *Persian cultural universe* in nationalist Iran and postcolonial India" by making us rethink the worldliness of literary events (pp. 10-11, emphasis added). The book then argues that "Fedallah and Javid are strategically employed to foreground Ishmael's Americanness in *Moby-Dick* and Fassih's Iranianness in *The Story of Javid*" (p. 91). In this chapter, the author also draws parallels between Ishmael and Ismail Fassih (note the similarities in their first names) in terms of their attitudes to dehumanizing the historical Other. However, Vafa argues "Fassih assumes moral responsibility to unearth the truth" (p. 109).

Chapter Four, "Call Her Mergan: Worlding a 'Defiant Subject'", relates the defiant dispositions of Mergan and Um Saad as "cultural correctives" to Fedallah. The narratives of *Missing Soluch* and *Um Saad* are compared due to the "absence of formative male characters" and the presence of "formidable female protagonists to occupy the narrative center stage" (p. 139). Both female characters have attachments to the land. Their resistance is an expression of their counter-narratives to the hegemonies and gives a voice to otherwise silenced characters. This chapter also analyses another of Dowlatabadi's stories, *Safar*, in which the Ahabesque character, Mukhtar, returns from Kuwait where he used to work on a waling ship, like the *Pequod's* crew. The author highlights a change in Dowlatabadi to replace "the male anti-hero" in *Safar* with "the female protagonist" in *Missing Soluch* (p. 159). Moreover, the shift from Mukhtar and

his abandoned wife to a focus on Mergan in the absence of Soluch promises to transcend “the sites of epistemic violence” (p. 176). Accordingly, this chapter mentions a remarkable achievement in “Dowlatabadi’s patriarchal stature among his contemporaries” to include “some of the most compelling male authored representations of femininities in Persian fiction” (p. 154). Overall, in Chapter Four, Vafa argues that through the worlding of Dowlatabadi’s Mergan and Kanafani’s Um Saad, who can speak beyond Fassih’s masculine dogma and Ishmael’s textual violence, Fedallah’s proleptic narrative reaches its most democratic and defiant potential.

Chapter Five, “A Melvillean Vision, Amiru’s Pledge to the World”, concludes the argument by analyzing a haunting prolepsis of Iranian cinema’s engagement with *Moby-Dick*. Vafa makes it clear that he is conscious of the differences between Amiru, and his compatriots, Javid and Mergan, as Amiru defies territorial boundaries, and is detached from national identity politics. However, he selects this movie, *The Runner*, due to Naderi’s literary anchorage with Melville and *Moby-Dick* (p. 185). The author maintains that Naderi possibly believes *Moby-Dick* has a “kind of destructive pessimism” he “cannot afford” (Vafa, 2016, p. 186), and he also may be unaware of Fedallah’s proleptic narrative to “take another pledge” (Melville, p. 337). However, “Amiru takes another pledge and the crew survives” (Vafa, 2016, p. 194). The book’s poetic conclusion is: “toward a democratic multiplicity of literary worlds, Fedallah has passed the harpoon. Holding it within the silver screen, Amiru flies away” (p. 195).

Recasting American and Persian Literatures is an original argument against the cult of Melvillean readings and explores a wide range of intertextual references to American, Iranian and Palestinian literatures and histories. It also engages with a wide range of postcolonial and World Literature thinkers such as Said, Damrosch, Dabashi, Mufti and others. The language of the book is highly sophisticated. Although Vafa explains his far-reaching comparisons, I personally sometimes felt that more justification was needed: i.e. comparisons between Um Saad and Mergan, or Yezad and Javid. Moreover, there is an ambivalence towards Mergan with which some readers might take issue. In Chapter Four, part

of the narrative relates Mergan (because of her name) to a Zoroastrian origin (p. 133), and some eleven pages later Islam is considered as her “geographic marker of Identity” (p. 144).

One point is noteworthy about the transliteration systems used in the book, about which some might feel confused, as though the author unmindfully switches between two different systems: the transliterated and the translated references. However, as Vafa explains his transliteration system on page vii, the reason is that there are references to both the transliterated *Ja-yi Khali-i Suluch* (*The Empty Place of Soluch*) as well as the translated *Missing Soluch*. The same is true about the translated *The Story of Javid* and Vafa’s transliterations from *Dastan-I Javid*. For example, in the name Ali Genav, the letter /e/ represents the sound /e/, while in the name Saba Vasifi, the letter /i/ represents the sound /e/. Hassan in Mirza Hassan has a double “s”. However Hasan Zolfaqari has a single “s” (p. 155). Genav and Hassan are from the English translation, while Vasifi and Hasan are the author’s transliteration. Thus, Vafa is utterly conscious in his shifting between the transliteration systems.

In sum, this comprehensive and challenging work is an original attempt to make the often-neglected Parsi Fedallah’s voice audible through a subversive close reading and allows his proleptic message to travel across the world literary systems (of Persian, Indian, and Palestinian) and cinematic frames. By “recasting American and Persian literatures”, Vafa complicates the flat cartography of World Literature to reach to a multiplicity that imbeds the marginal characters of center and periphery in their “local histories and formative geographies” (p. 22).