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Nationalisms and Imperial Cultures

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This chapter is based on the assumption that conflicts between separate ethnolinguistic identities and imperial cultures have existed throughout history, and often played important roles. The four-volume work, *Literature: A World History*, serves as a starting-point for a discussion of the effects of such conflicts on various literatures. Examples are taken from, in particular, literatures written in Iranian and Slavonic languages, but the Chinese, Arabic and Turkic/Turkish impact on various literatures is also mentioned. Finally, it is questioned what this four-volume work has done to address the problem of literature and such conflicts, and what can be done to avoid spreading narratives that are – perhaps unconsciously – imperialistic. After all, this work is written in English, the most broadly used imperial language ever, and it is questioned what it means that it is being presented in this language.

The cultural implications of the current war in Ukraine are obvious. The uses of the Ukrainian and Russian languages and the national character of literature, as well as culture generally, are hotly discussed and used intensely in the propaganda of both sides. This deep conflict between hegemonic imperial culture and ethnic languages and cultures has certainly existed since the time the first empires were established some 2500 years ago – albeit in various ways. In a symposium entitled 'Writing transcultural literary history in a globalized world', which was organized in Uppsala on 11–12 October 2023, in order to celebrate the recent publication of, and reflect on, the four-volume work *Literature: A World History* (Damrosch and Lindberg-Wada 2022), the authors of this work, among other things, discussed what we had done to present the literary cultures of subordinate ethno-linguistic entities and what it is possible to do in order to avoid spreading narratives that are – perhaps unconsciously – imperialistic.

In his much-read and quoted work *Sapiens – A Brief History of Humankind* (Harari 2011) the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari defines 'empire' as a central

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state ruling over a considerable number of subordinate peoples. From around 550 BC, when Cyrus the Great of Persia founded the Achaemenian empire, emperors have generally presented themselves as the king of all their subjects – often with divine sanction. Thus, Qin Shi Huang unified China in 221 BC and proclaimed himself as Huang Di, emperor, a title that was to remain for the next two millennia. When the Persian empire was conquered by Alexander the Great in 334 BC it was followed in Europe by a Greek and after that a Roman empire along the same pattern and so on – continent after continent.

Empires are thus rather clear entities, but 'nationalism' is generally seen as an anachronistic notion when we go further back than around AD 1800. However, it is not easy to find a stringent term for shared identities based on ethnicity, language, religion and cultural traditions in what Benedict Anderson (1983) calls *Imagined communities*. This has been widely discussed, especially since the pioneering study *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* published in 1969 by Fredrik Barth, but here I will base my discussion simply on the assumption that such shared ethno-linguistic identities have existed throughout history and have played important roles. The previously mentioned *Literature: A World History* (henceforth *LAWH*) will serve as a starting point for a discussion of the literary dynamics of empires and subordinate ethno-linguistic entities.

First, however, a number of interconnected problems should be mentioned. When we approach older periods or foreign cultures, the concept 'literature' may be difficult to use. This has been discussed by Anders Pettersson in his contribution to *LAWH* and also in this issue. Here, I will use a provisional definition based specifically on my studies of Persian literature in a paper with the title '"Genres" in Persian literature 900–1900' (Utas 2006: 199–241). My suggestion there is to use two central characteristics: elaboration of language and/or narrativity (Utas 2006: 206). Literary works, or rather, what we nowadays tend to regard as literature, are necessarily expressed in languages/dialects, and such works may be preserved in various ways, generally orally or in writing. Writing systems are quite often associated with religions, for example the Latin alphabet with Catholic or Lutheran Christendom, Greek with orthodox Christendom and Arabic with Islam. The Aramaic alphabet is a special case in this respect as it is used in texts of a variety of religions, and the same may probably be said about other scripts, for example Chinese.

During later centuries there has been a growing tendency to regard mainly written texts as 'literature', but in older times oral 'literature' – or perhaps rather 'traditions' – was/were often more important than written ones, and recently the situation has again become more complicated by the uses of electronic media. However, here we encounter difficulties when writing literary history. How can we acquire precise knowledge of older oral 'texts' and how to locate them in time and space? This latter problem has special importance in connection with the topic I want to take up here. How should we describe literatures produced by subordinate peoples in culturally dominant empires? In a very broad survey of literatures, such as *LAWH,* it is probably unavoidable that attention is concentrated on texts in the most widely

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used languages, i.e., often the languages of empires. But how far is it possible to include presentations of literary works of subordinate peoples? In order to open a discussion about this, I'll give a few examples taken from the four volumes of *LAWH*.

As for Chinese, we can read in Vol. 1 of *LAWH* (Damrosch and Lindberg-Wada 2022: 17) that

> Chinese written characters became a strong cohesive force for the idea of a unified China as a political entity and made it possible for such a big country to have one written language despite the diversity of its spoken languages, some of which have such different pronunciation that they become mutually unintelligible.

One wonders how literary specimens in such different languages could be fully represented in the common script and, furthermore, what the use of adaptions of Chinese writing, as well as Chinese cultural and religious influence, meant for the development of such literatures and those of neighbouring countries such as Vietnam, Korea and Japan as well as dependent peoples such as Mongols and Uigurs. This problem is, of course, especially obvious in the case of a logographic script such as Chinese, but it also happens that alphabetically written utterances in one language can be read in completely different languages, as in the case of old Aramaic that apparently was used in the Achaemenian empire to transmit messages that were interpreted in Old Persian as well as other languages (Utas 2013: 236; Gershevitch 1979; Greenfield 1985: 707–708).

This brings me to my own field, the history of Iranian languages and literatures. There are a number of more or less different Iranian languages, but in the Achaemenian empire in the sixth century BCE, Persian became the language of the rulers. Persian, however, was not imposed on the subordinate peoples, who could keep their languages, religions and cultures. When political power passed on to the Seleucid and the Parthian dynasties, the linguistic and cultural situation became even more complex. During the almost 500 years of their rule, we know very little about what could be regarded as literary works. There are, however, a number of multi-lingual inscriptions that bear witness to the use of a number of languages. The most interesting example is the tri-lingual inscription that the second Sasanian king, Shapur, had engraved on the walls of a monument known as Ka'ba-yi Zardusht at Naqsh-i Rustam in c. 262 CE. It is written in three languages, Middle Persian, Parthian and Greek, and tells us the genealogy of the Great King, the names of the provinces over which he rules and his exploits in the wars against the Romans. Interestingly, it has a parallel in the almost 800(!) years earlier tri-lingual Bisutun inscription of the Achaemenian Great King Darius inscribed on a cliff-face nearby. Likewise, we can see similarities in an inscription set up by the Indian Maurya king Ashoka around 250 BCE and the so-called *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* (Achievements of the divine Augustus) set up by the Roman emperor Augustus in the very beginning of the Common Era (Utas 2013: 241). Literary or not, the cultural expressions of empires seem to be contagious.

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There are also later traces of an oral minstrel tradition carried on by bards, as described by Mary Boyce (1957) in her article 'The Parthian *gôsân* and Iranian minstrel tradition', as mentioned in *LAWH* 1 (2022: 105). We know more about Manichean texts from the Parthian epoch. The Manichean religion was based on a specific script, and its fundamental texts appeared both in Parthian and a number of other languages. Something of this has been described in *LAWH 2* (2022: 478–479), but the role of the Manicheans for the transmission of literary texts from east to west is certainly worthy of deeper studies.

Parthian is a north-western Iranian language, but when a form of Persian (a south-Iranian language) reappeared as a state language with the founding of the Sasanian empire around 225 CE, Persian was introduced as the politically and culturally dominant language – that is, formulating the empire. This imperial tradition, supposed to have been founded by the Achaemenians almost one thousand years earlier, was then taken over by the following dynasties that ruled over Iran, also when they were of Turkish – or rather Turkic – origin. This meant that literary expressions in other languages used within the borders of the empire became both restricted and heavily influenced by Persian. Iranian was constructed to be synonymous with Persian. Literary expressions in other Iranian languages, such as Kurdish, Balochi and Pashto were marginalized. In the first volumes of *LAWH*, I found little space for the inclusion of those literatures. This may be seen as a way of passing on an imperial narrative, although in *LAWH 4* there is a short paragraph on 'Kurdish, Afghan, Tajik, Balochi, and Ossetic literature' (2022: 1287–1288).

As for non-Iranian languages used in Iran, I have already mentioned Aramaic (a Semitic language), which was already widely used in the Achaemenian empire and still remains the language of Syrian Christians, so-called Assyrians. There is also a Jewish-Persian literature, written in a variety of Persian, but using Hebrew script, and from the eleventh century onwards there are also a number of Turkic languages and dialects used in Iran but generally not producing a significant written literature. However, the by far most important non-Iranian language is Arabic, which was brought to the country with the advent of Islam from the seventh century onwards. Arabic soon became the language of religion, law, formal education, and science. Literature in the New Persian language that came into being in the eighth to ninth centuries, written with Arabic script, was heavily influenced by Arabic literature, and during later centuries a mixed Islamic culture developed, in which Persian became an important component. This, then, was the result of another kind of imperial influence, that of the Arabic caliphate. At the same time, Turkish-speaking invaders came to form most of the ruling dynasties of Iran, although their linguistic influence mainly stayed within the military field, while Persian became an important literary language far outside Iran proper – especially in Turkey and Central and South Asia. As regards Muslim India, this has been recorded in a short chapter on 'Foreign languages' in the South Asian section of *LAWH 2* (2022: 409–411).

The Islamic caliphate is a striking example of how far religion, language, script and imperial traditions may be interconnected. The caliphate developed into a full-blown empire under the first four successors of the Prophet Muhammed. It was

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followed by the Umayyad caliphate, which moved the capital to Damascus in Syria in 661, followed by the Abbasid Caliphate centred in Baghdad from 750, then still a united Arab empire. Baghdad became an important centre not only of religion but also of culture and science. However, Persian remained important in the bureaucracy and in the spread of Islamic culture to new areas. In spite of the fact that what I have termed an Arab empire fell to pieces, the influence of the Arabic language and Arabic literary forms remained strong in the Middle East, North Africa, Spain and Sicily – and in many ways in the whole Muslim world – but like the widespread use of Latin in post-Roman Europe, this should be seen as both a religious and a cultural result of an imperial heritage, with a far-reaching influence on local literatures.

The Arabic and Persian imperial traditions were competing and intertwined in many ways. A quite instructive description of this is found in an article by Hayrettin Yücesoy entitled 'Language of empire: politics of Arabic and Persian in the Abbasid world' (Yücesoy 2015). This makes clear how far conscious linguistic and literary policies were able to transform the cultural and literary situation in the wide areas dominated by the respective empires, which interestingly enough heavily influenced each other. Translations of central historical, religious and literary works played important roles in asserting the hegemony of the respective literary culture.

The imperial tradition of the Arab caliphate was taken over by the so-called Ottoman empire, which was founded when the Turkish Ottomans defeated the Byzantines at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and found its centre when they finally took over Constantinople in 1453, which henceforth became Istanbul. Ottoman rule spread quickly over the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, introducing Turkish as the dominant administrative language, and Islam and Islamic jurisdiction over areas where a wide range of other languages and cultural traditions prevailed, especially after Selim I established a new caliphate in 1517. The empire then stretched from Algiers in the west to the shores of the Persian Gulf in the east and Mekka and Egypt in the south to southern Ukraine and the vicinity of Vienna in the north. Ottoman Turkish, using the Arabic alphabet, had developed under the strong influence of both Arabic and Persian. This mixed heritage certainly influenced languages and literatures of the dominated regions, but it is beyond my competence to discuss that here.

Because of the dominance of the Ottoman empire, it has been common to use the term 'Turkish' for the language of the Ottomans and 'Turkic' for the manifold related languages used over huge areas of West, Central, East, and North Asia as well as parts of Europe. It is obvious that it has been difficult to treat this wealth of different literatures in the broad survey of literatures found in *LAWH*, but the very concise presentation of 'Turkic-Mongolian and Turkish literature' that is found in Vol. 2 (2022: 512–526) as well as the short chapters on 'Turkish/Turkic literature', 'Turkish literature in Anatolia and Environs' and 'Eurasian Turkic literature' in Vol. 3 (2022: 848–861) succeed well in avoiding imperial perspectives. One reason for this may be seen in the strong Turko-nationalistic element found in the new Turkish state that was founded in 1923 – finally abolishing the caliphate and stressing instead the common Turkic and thus Eurasian inheritance.

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To take another example, let us look at a still existing territorial empire such as Russia. In the same way that the Persian empire took over the Iranian identity, in spite of the fact that there were other Iranian-speaking peoples under its sovereignty, the various forms of the Russian empire monopolized East-Slavonic culture and endeavoured to make it all Russian. The so-called Kiev-Rus' state that flourished from the eighth to the thirteenth century CE is seen by both Russians and Ukrainians as their political origin. In fact, the Kiev-Rus' state is supposed to have been founded by the Nordic Vikings (Varangians) Rurik and his son Oleh (Oleg). At that time, the area was populated by peoples speaking various East-Slavonic languages, possibly with a Ukrainian or perhaps rather proto-Ukrainian majority. This state fell when the Mongols conquered Kiev in 1240 and established a Tatar state also known as the Golden Horde. In the fifteenth century, central power was established in Moscow under a descendant of Rurik, by then completely russified.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Moscovite rulers pretended to take over the leadership of the Greek-Orthodox church and started to present themselves as divinely appointed leaders of the 'Third Rome', and in the sixteenth century Ivan IV (called the Terrible) took the title tsar (taken from Latin Caesar). So-called Church-Slavonic and Russian were written with Cyrillic letters modelled on Greek script. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, when Russia had established itself as a great power, Peter the Great adopted the title 'imperator'. The empire was complete, and the language and culture of subordinate peoples, such as Ukrainians and Belorussians, were subdued. Still, there was a breach in the arising empire. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, this became known as the conflict between *zapadniki* (Westernizers) and Slavophiles. In fact, this conflict had already started with the efforts of Peter the Great to establish Russia as a modern state, moving the capital from Moscow to the newly founded St Petersburg in the west, using western models but still stressing the Slavic and Greek-orthodox foundations of his state. This is a conflict that remains at the heart of Russian culture and politics even today.

The problem in our current context is that, until recently, the Russian imperial narrative has been broadly accepted. Thus, in Vols. 2–4 of *LAWH* there is no mention of Ukrainian or of Belorussian literature. For example, the so-called 'Igor tale' (*Slovo o polku Ihorevel/Igoreve*) from c. 1200 is called 'the most original and remarkable original work in Russian' in Vol. 2 (2022: 657), although it seems more Ukrainian than Russian and is claimed by the Ukrainians as the foundation of Ukrainian literature. Nor is there any trace of the national poet of Ukraine, Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861), nor of the Ukrainian nationality of important authors such as Gogol. What the Russian-Soviet empire meant for the literature of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania is also not mentioned. Russian and Soviet impact on countries in the Caucasus and Central and North Asia is an even more complicated matter, especially considering the Soviet policy of encouraging various national literatures as a kind of ethnographic expression of the member states in Central Asia.

So far, I have taken examples from literatures composed in Iranian, Arabic, Turkic and Slavonic languages, but it is obvious that in multilingual empires and states, countless literary cultures try to find ways and means of expression. What can

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one do in order not to perpetuate imperial perspectives on literature? After all, the work under discussion is written in English, the most broadly used imperial language ever, and here it is being discussed in English. What does that mean? Much attention has been paid to what is generally called post-colonial studies, but in a deeper historical perspective most times may be seen as both colonial and post-colonial – even so today, although colonial in new ways. In a publication such as the one discussed here, the inclusion of manifold literatures is, of course, very much a matter of space, but it is still a question of perspectives, too. Literary studies should be politically neutral, or is that an impossible ideal in our current world?

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