

## **AIPS STRG- Abstract Noor Habib**

**2023**

Remapping Literary Worlds: Miraji's Urdu Translations of World Poetry Existing scholarly discussions on *jadīyat* do not sufficiently acknowledge the role that translation played in shaping the modernist moment in Urdu literary history. What sorts of translated texts were Urdu readers consuming in the early/mid twentieth century? How did those texts circulate in the global literary marketplace? How did they in turn influence Urdu poetics? What layers of mediation were already in place before the texts were re-translated and re-circulated? What about the colonial orientalist context that formed the backdrop to these debates? These sets of questions motivate my current research project that considers how translation engendered unique and otherwise impossible literary affinities that bypassed the lines of both empire and nation. In particular I am investigating the work of the Urdu poet Miraji (1912-1949) who was a prolific poet and translator. Miraji consulted a range of works in the libraries of Lahore where he read everything he considered modern. He translated the works of French, German, Chinese, Greek, Korean, and American/British writers into Urdu and published these translations alongside commentaries in literary journals between 1939-1945. Miraji accessed these works via English and argued that it was necessary for Urdu readers to read widely in order to "broaden the hem of Urdu". Indeed, Miraji's own poetry is infused with literary influences as wide ranging as Baudelaire and Sappho. As the foremost modernist poet and thinker of his time, I argue that Miraji's translations deserve a special place in Urdu modernism and demand more focused scholarly attention. Often, modernism in global south contexts is misunderstood to be a mere mimicry of Western forms, a grossly inaccurate over-simplification. Taking Miraji as a case study, my research so far has revealed that not only is that untrue, but that the East-West binary itself is often a construction that collapses into itself the more it is probed and investigated. With support from the AIPS short term research grant, I hope to track down the original sources that Miraji consulted for his translations and trace the routes that these texts took before they were eventually rendered into Urdu. A striking example is Miraji's translations of love poems from China and Korea, which he came across in *Coloured Stars: Versions of 50 Asiatic Love Poems* (1918) by Edward Powys Mathers who had in turn translated mostly from the French translations of these poems by Adolphe Thalasso and Judith Gautier. Despite the proximity to these Asian literary traditions, Miraji's access was mediated by oriental translations, a consequence of being a subject of Empire, and an illustration of the dynamic and multidirectional nature of translations themselves. I anticipate that Miraji's sources are scattered variously in the Punjab Oriental College library, the Punjab Public Library, and the Dyal Singh Library in Lahore and the Mushfiq Khwaja Library in Karachi, and in the British Library in London. I hope to track those and similar endeavors by Miraji's contemporaries to get a fuller sense of the place of translated world literature in Urdu letters. Ultimately, I hope to center translation per se as a crucial framework within which a lot of literary, cultural, and at times political processes were understood and negotiated in late colonial India.