



## TRANSCRIPT

### *Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa*

#### **How Dr. Shawkat Toorawa Uses Music and Pop Culture to Make Arabic Literature Accessible**

With an international background and love of languages, Professor Shawkat M. Toorawa decided to study intensive Arabic with the encouragement of a highly influential advisor at the University of Pennsylvania, which set him on a path to becoming a professor of Arabic literature, Comparative literature and Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University. In this episode, Professor Toorawa reflects on the journey, which was admittedly not linear, with stops in medieval French literature, modern British poetry, and even U.S. history along the way. Professor Toorawa also discusses "The dr T projecT," a regular drop-in session for students to learn about items of cultural interest — from music to literature — to aid in his lessons.

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Fred Lawrence: This podcast episode was generously funded by two anonymous donors. If you would like to support the podcast in similar ways, please contact Hadley Kelly at [hkelly@pbk.org](mailto:hkelly@pbk.org). Thanks for listening.

Hello, and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I'm Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the Phi Beta Kappa Society. Since 2018, we have welcomed leading thinkers, visionaries, and artists to our podcast. These individuals have shaped our collective understanding of some of today's most pressing and consequential matters, in addition to sharing stories with us about their scholarly and personal journeys. Many of our guests are Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who travel the country to our Phi Beta Kappa chapters, where they spend two days on campus and present free public lectures. We invite you to attend. For more information about visiting scholars' lectures, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org).

Today I'm excited to welcome Professor Shawkat M. Toorawa. Professor Toorawa is professor of Arabic literature, professor of Comparative literature, and Chair of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at Yale University. His wide-ranging scholarly interests include classical and medieval Arabic literature, the Qur'an, the Waqwaq Tree, Indian Ocean Studies, modern poetry translation, and science fiction film and literature. For the past decade, he has been co-Executive Editor of the Library of Arabic Literature, an initiative to edit and translate significant text of the pre-modern Arabic literary heritage.

His book, *The Devotional Qur'an: Surahs and Passages from the Heart of Islam*, is soon to come out with Yale University Press. An edited collection on the literary dimensions of the Qur'an, the Edinburgh companion to the literary study of the Qur'an, is forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press. Welcome, professor.

Shawkat Toorawa: Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here.

Fred Lawrence: We have so many different things we could talk about from your wide-ranging interests. I do want to begin with your journey, which has brought you to New Haven, Connecticut and your distinguished position at Yale. But as I understand it, it was a long journey with a number of stops along the way, and if I have this right, those stops include London, Paris, Osaka, Hong Kong, and Singapore. So, tell us a little bit about this journey and how did it lead to an interest in languages and translation and all the things you've wound up spending your life doing?

Shawkat Toorawa: Happy to talk about that. So, my parents are from the island of Mauritius, and they met in England, which is why my journey began there. I was born in London. A few years later, the company my father worked for transferred him to Paris, he was a multinational. I grew up in Paris, and he was then transferred to Osaka. We weren't there very long, I was quite excited actually, about moving to Japan, but several weeks into our time there, he was transferred again to Hong Kong. We weren't there very long before we moved to Singapore. So the bulk of my childhood was about seven and a half years in Paris, and about seven and a half years in Singapore, and it's from an international school in Singapore that I went to college, that I went to university.

Most of the students at the United World College of Southeast Asia, which is part of the United World College system of schools, either went back to their home countries, many of us were internationals, or to the UK, and my difficulty in deciding what to study in university was that the UK typically required you to pick a course of study, so you applied for a specific subject, and I realized that I wasn't convinced or completely decided about what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to learn a new language so that I would've access to a new literary tradition.

And so I decided to apply to the United States, and I had to create a kind of short list of languages so that I could decide where to apply, and I decided that those should be

Arabic, to which I had a connection because we're a Muslim family. I was raised Muslim and I was raised to read the Qur'an, so we're ancestrally from Gujarat. Gujarati forebears traveled to Mauritius on my father's side of the family, on my mother's side, to Mauritius via East Africa, via Mombasa and Lamu. My parents actually spoke Gujarati, spoke, read and wrote it, but they never spoke it to me. We spoke other languages, we spoke French, then we spoke English, and Mauritian Creole. So, Arabic and Gujarati seemed like two good places to start. And then when I said to people that I was going to the United States possibly to study Arabic, many folks said to me, "Why wouldn't you be going to the Arab world to study Arabic?"

Fred Lawrence: What was the answer to that?

Shawkat Toorawa: Well, one answer is, I wanted to study in an American university or in a Western university. I had had Western training and I thought that that would serve me well. But the other was I inverted it, and I thought, well, if I'm going to America, I should study an American language. I'd already studied Spanish and was fluent and happy with it. So, I identified Hopi as being a language that I might study, and I ended up picking the University of Pennsylvania where Gujarati, Arabic and Hopi, were all taught, and also where there was the leading Arabic program in the country at the time.

And when I arrived, Roger Allen, who was my advisor, though not my first Arabic teacher but certainly my Arabic advisor and my undergraduate advisor, prevailed on me to focus on Arabic. He told me that not enough people were studying Arabic, that I could pick up Gujarati anytime because it was an ancestral language and that, anyway, the Hopi professor was on leave. It was actually a professor of anthropology who would teach Hopi, and so he essentially pushed me from regular Arabic into intensive Arabic, which was 10 hours a week.

Fred Lawrence: Wow.

Shawkat Toorawa: And that essentially displaced any possibility of studying anything else. He was also very influential in that I admired him immediately. He used to ride his bicycle to work every day and was surrounded by books. I first heard the name Naguib Mahfouz, who went on to win the Nobel Prize in Roger Allen's classes, and I decided I wanted to be like him. And I asked him sort of not soon after I arrived, "How does one become like you?" And he said, "Well, you do a degree in Arabic, you do a PhD, you get a job, and hopefully that's what you do for the rest of your life." And that's essentially what I set out to do, although it was not linear, it was a circuitous journey to it after that, but it was a wonderful choice and I'm very happy with it.

Fred Lawrence: It was as early as your early days at University of Pennsylvania that suppose I'd said to that young man at University of Pennsylvania, "You will grow up to be an academic and

a major scholar of Arabic literature." That young man would've said, "Yes, that checks out. That makes sense." He wouldn't have said, "No, that's not a path I see myself on."

Shawkat Toorawa: I think so. As I said, Roger was quite influential. I liked his life, riding this bicycle, being surrounded by books. I also didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, my parents were very hands off about that. They said, "Find your own way, decide what you want to do." So, there was no pressure from them.

Most professions didn't appeal to me. I also wasn't a very 9:00 to 5:00 person, and the academic life seemed much more self structured. So I think, yes, I think it would've been reasonable. Although I will say that when I did say to Roger Allen, "This is what I'm going to do," he said, "Well, it is a little early to kind of know or decide this." I say, "Yes, but you have to have a plan. It doesn't mean I'll stick to it. It doesn't mean it'll come true, this dream, but this is what I'm going to aim for," and it is what I ended up with but as I said, it did have some zigs and zags. I ended up working for the family company in Kuala Lumpur for a year. I ended up working for the family company in Mauritius for three years. Just detours along the way.

Fred Lawrence: Would it have seemed plausible at the time that you would spend the rest of your life and career in Mauritius, or did you always assume you'd come back to North America?

Shawkat Toorawa: I assumed that I couldn't assume anything and so I made the best of the University of Mauritius. I rather enjoyed teaching at the University of Mauritius. I was asked to do some unusual things. I was hired in a humanities department into the history unit, taught Indian Ocean history and Near Eastern history, things that I knew a little bit about. I knew a little bit about Near Eastern history. I'm really an Arabic literature person, right? So this is the equivalent of asking someone who specializes in Shakespeare to teach British history. One can do it, but it isn't necessarily what one had planned to do. But as someone with an interest in a lot of literatures, I ended up teaching history of French, medieval French literature when I was there, and also, modern British poetry and also a class on US history.

Fred Lawrence: US history?

Shawkat Toorawa: Yes.

Fred Lawrence: How did you wind up being asked to teach US history? Other than the fact that you had of course spent time as an undergraduate and graduate student in the US, which gave you some basic familiarity, I suppose?

Shawkat Toorawa: Believe it or not, that was the basis on which I was asked, although I think I knew more about US history from just having had an excellent secondary school education in history than what I'd learned in the time since in the US, but I suppose it was both combined.

So the University of Mauritius at the time had a BA honors history degree, also BA honors French, BA honors English, and I pointed out at one point in an examination meeting to my colleagues that I thought it was unfortunate that students were being given an honors degree in history and had no real coursework in the US except for one module or one course called the World since 1945, and they said, "Well, we don't have any specialists." And I said, "I understand that, but it just seems like a lacuna in their education." And then someone said, "Wait a minute, you studied in the US, didn't you?" And I said, "Well, yes." Anyway, they said, "Well, either it's you or no one."

So I went home and I called Susan Crystal, who was the first officer, public affairs officer at the US Embassy and said, "Susan, did you take AP US history?" And she goes, "Yes, a long time ago." I said, "Great, you must've had a textbook." And she says, "Yes." And I said, "Great, I need that textbook. I need 35 of them." And she said, "You need 35 textbooks?" I said, "Yes, and I need them in a week." And so she had them couriered, and I showed up in class and I started teaching US history. So, one of my many acts of imposter. I think we all have imposter syndrome to some degree, but I've actually been an imposter, so.

Fred Lawrence: Well, I can see now where the wide-ranging background comes from, to a certain extent. To paraphrase Shakespeare, some have a diversity of interests thrust upon them, and you obviously did.

Let me turn to the area that you've worked in and published in so successfully and extensively, in the translation area, and I do want to talk about Arabic literature in a minute, but first, I want to stay with projects and theory, and talk a little bit about what you are trying to accomplish when you translate a work from one language to another. It's often said that literature, even if it's just on the written page, even if it's not theater being performed, is a combination of lyrics and music. And how does one capture the lyrics and the music in a translation, or is that not the goal? Do you say, "I'm just going to do lyrics and they're going to have to get the music on their own somehow?"

Shawkat Toorawa: So this is a complicated one, simply because I've done translation in very different areas and different projects have taken me in different directions. But let me take three examples and use those as a way to illustrate my answer.

The first is, the first things I ever translated from Arabic was the poetry of, were poems by the contemporary, still alive poet, Adonis, regarded as certainly the most influential Arabic poet. Some people think the greatest, but that's arguable, but certainly the most influential. Sort of a T.S. Eliot figures in the Arabic literary tradition, both as a critic and as a poet. And I first encountered him in a class with Roger Allen, who I've now mentioned several times, on modern Arabic poetry and I learned from him and from the scholarship that people considered Adonis hard and difficult, and that was why he was not translated, and I thought that was a kind of an absurd position to take. Lots of things are hard and difficult and they are translated into other languages. I know this,

and I knew this from having read many things, that in those languages are "hard," but that have made it into English or French or Spanish, which all of which-

Fred Lawrence: James Joyce somehow has been translated into other languages.

Shawkat Toorawa: Exactly, exactly. And I was sort of annoyed by this, and so what I did is I set about to translate Adonis, and I seized upon a collection that was not well-served but was I felt quite important. It was also not well-served because they were long poems and it's a lot easier to publish short things, publishers are more interested, readers are more interested. And so I took perhaps, I wouldn't say it was one of his harder collections, but it was certainly one that wasn't getting enough attention, and I translated that, and that's when I first cut my teeth on translation and I realized I was decent at it, not great. Roger Allen was himself a very successful translator, and I had other teachers who were as well.

And I realized that it was difficult to translate a modernist poet because of trying to work out what the modernist sensibility was in English. I was helped a little by the fact that being literal, for want of a better term, was going to help make those specific poems by Adonis work in English. So that was my first kind of contact with translation, it was a successful initiative. They were subsequently published as a little book with Syracuse University Press, and they caught the eye and the attention of poets and others. So that was gratifying.

I next engaged in translation in any kind of serious way when I started tackling the Qur'an. I realized when I looked at the Qur'an, the translations of the Qur'an and I, of course now had studied Arabic and understood Arabic a little bit more and was able to look at the translations against the Arabic, although what I'm about to say holds true whether one knows Arabic or not, which is that most translations of the Qur'an are very wooden and hew very closely to the Arabic syntax and are guided by a sense that, well, if you sacrifice the literalness and somehow you're sacrificing meaning, without really ever thinking about whether meaning was being sacrificed in doing that. That somehow, assuming that meaning rested only in a kind of literal presentation of the Arabic, and I found that was not only produced that impoverished versions of the Arabic, but were also not capturing something you asked in your question, which is the musicality and the what Michael Sells has called the aural as in aural, A-U-R-A-L, multidimensionality of the Qur'an.

Fred Lawrence: The way in which it sounds.

Shawkat Toorawa: The way it sounds.

Fred Lawrence: And particularly in ancient text, which was meant to be read. Many of the consumers of it, if that's a fair term, not literate themselves. It was an aural.

Shawkat Toorawa: Absolutely.

Fred Lawrence: A-U-R-A-L tradition.

Shawkat Toorawa: Yes, absolutely. Now my handicap is I'm not a poet, which I freely acknowledged. So what I began to do with the Qur'an is I began to pay attention to rhyme and sound and rhythm and cadence, and produced translations that I published in journals, mainly one journal, the Journal of Qur'anic Studies, which at the time, perhaps still is the leading journal in Qur'anic studies, and it was very, again, gratifying because colleagues were happy with these translations and were able to use them and have been in their classes.

But then two things happened. In 2010, I was asked by Philip Kennedy to be one of the two Executive Editors of the Library of Arabic Literature, which is an initiative to translate the pre-modern Arabic literary heritage, along the lines of the Loeb Classics Library or the I Tatti. And I also began to realize that when I read my Qur'an translations out loud to myself, and I set aside the desideratum that I wanted to pay attention to sound, they actually were quite wooden. They were just wooden in a different way. I began to play with the Qur'an translations to try and open out the sound a bit and make them more English sounding.

Meanwhile, with the Library of Arabic Literature being basically started from scratch, James Montgomery, who was the other executive editor and myself, together with Philip Kennedy, the journal editor and our board that we appointed, we realized as we were commissioning translations and as we looked at what already existed in our field, that they too, those translations too hewed very closely to the Arabic syntax. It exhibited what we call industry standard, and this is where rather than saying something the way one might say it in English, we were simply producing English versions of the Arabic.

And so that realization with the Library of Arabic Literature, which has now produced some 50 books, which we very closely edit and intervene in, much to the many editors and translators chagrin, and my attempts for 20 years or so to make the English of the Qur'an sound more English, those two activities have gotten me to a sort of a different place where I now feel very much that it really has to be the English that drives the translation. It really has to be, to put it very simply, one has to be able to read this to say, a 15-year-old, a 12-year-old, and have them think it sounds natural.

Fred Lawrence: Are there other translators, perhaps even of other languages whose work you admire in this regard, and feel like you're part of a broader trans contextual translation project?

Shawkat Toorawa: There are translators I read, and there are some I interact with, and I take a huge amount of inspiration from their work, but I don't think that I am anywhere near that caliber. One is Peter Cole, who's a translator, who is in fact based at Yale, and I actually showed all my Qur'an translations to him and said, "I need you to tell me

whether this is going to pass Peter Cole muster, because if it doesn't, I'm not going to do it," or because one of the things I decided about, especially with the Qur'an, is it's such an important text that I felt that if someone like Peter who's a poet before he was a translator, didn't feel it was working, then I either needed to go back to the drawing board or let someone else do it. It's just too important a text. It was also important to me to make sure that the person who picked up the translation would say, "Now I get it. I get why people think this is an important text," and not read something that didn't really sing to them.

The other thing is, one of the difficulties with, let's just call it wooden translations or industry standard translations, is it often then makes real giants, scientists, doctors, literati from the Arabic past, sound dorky and give the reader the impression that this person really couldn't put together a phrase very well and really, it's the translator who's failing to do it. So the people who've inspired me, I guess, in that regard are people like Allen Mandelbaum's translation of *The Divine Comedy*, Peter Cole's own translations of Medieval Hebrew poetry from Spain, and importantly, Richard Sieburth, who is also sort of a godfather of the Library of Arabic literature as well. He helped with the setup of NYU Abu Dhabi, which is the outfit that helps fund the series published by NYU Press, and he's a stupendous translator and has translated from German, translated from French. I remember reading his translations of Nostradamus, of all things, and thinking, wow, this is the way one needs to do things.

So yes, you're right, there are translators, but I don't think I'm with them, I don't think I stand with them. I think the Library of Arabic Literature stands with the other series that have been produced because we've tried to hold the bar. But I, as a translator, see myself as just someone kind of fevering away in his corner trying to get people to pay a little bit more attention to this literary tradition that still doesn't get the kind of respect it deserves on the world stage.

Fred Lawrence: Tell me about The dr T project. If I have this story right, and it may be an urban legend, you'll tell me if my information is correct. While you were at Cornell, your post before Yale, that you found that you were teaching using various kinds of references and allusions, and your class wasn't picking up on your references and allusions, and you thought that in addition to the material that you were trying to teach, my goodness, they have to figure out the references and allusions that you have, and so you began The dr T project. Have I got that roughly right?

Shawkat Toorawa: You have that exactly right. So I was teaching a class called Introduction to Near Eastern Literatures, and we used the Longman Anthology of World Literature and/or the Norton Anthology of World Literature. The class typically started with the very earliest examples of literature, the Epic of Gilgamesh, Descent of Ishtar, Egyptian love songs, all the way up to the present day. I think the last time I taught it at Cornell, it was up to a Pamuk story that had been published in the New Yorker. That was a way



to introduce students to the diversity of the language traditions and literary traditions of the Near East, sort of a gateway course to the Near East Studies major and the department and so on. And inevitably, I would say something like, "Oh, doesn't this remind you or doesn't this remind us of the opening of *Eve of St. Agnes* by Keats?" And it's not that I had students who didn't know the *Eve of St. Agnes*, I had students who didn't know Keats.

So I began to tease the students and say, "I should teach a class called Everything Professor Toorawa thinks you should know, but you don't," every time I used to use something that they didn't know, and it was just to tease them because then I would try and find a way to explain it better. And some students contacted me that summer and said, "When are you going to teach that class?" And I realized that there was some interest, so I didn't want it to be a class, so it became what we called a drop-in session.

And so for 30 minutes, I decided I would talk about three items of cultural interest, and I confined them to areas that I knew something about. So a literary item, a musical item, and a general cultural item. And I figured, well, let's see if it works, and it worked. People would stop by. There was no expectation of interaction on my part. I would just start out there and do a kind of song and dance for seven to eight minutes on each item, and one of the things that was amazing to me was that there was at least one new person every week.

Fred Lawrence: Wow.

Shawkat Toorawa: So, clearly it had some success. And I did that for many years. And then when I moved to Yale, evidently it had preceded me to Yale because one of the things I was asked was, do you plan to bring The dr T projecT to Yale? And I said, "Yes."

Fred Lawrence: Apparently I do.

Shawkat Toorawa: Yes, I did. I do, and I did, and I always try to find a way to make it clear. One agenda is, there is no difference between low culture and high culture. That's one thing. The other thing is I try to show them that there are ways in which they actually already know this. So for example, I don't usually divulge what I'm going to do, but perhaps they won't be listening to this podcast. *Les Compagnons de la Chanson* do a very interesting version of an American song that everyone knows, and I thought it'll be interesting to introduce that.

Fred Lawrence: That would be the point of entry.

Shawkat Toorawa: Yes, and then mention Eurovision and mention any number of things. So it's always a way to talk about more than that. The literary item, sometimes it's a poem, sometimes it's an author, sometimes it's a publisher, and it's deeply satisfying because people show up at Yale as well, so there's four or five who always show up. And I've said this to people, it's sort of pure liberal arts education. They come with no, no one

who shows up gets a grade, gets any recognition of any kind. I don't get paid for this, I don't get any reward other than the reward of the satisfaction of doing it, and we're discussing culture, literature and music. It's hard to teach literature without being able to use references and allusions, I think anyway. And so what I realized when I started doing The dr T project, but I also realized I should talk to my kids more about things they were reading and watching, because although we are and still are very close, we didn't necessarily listen to the same music, for example.

Fred Lawrence: Yes, yes, yes.

Shawkat Toorawa: And that's when I began to realize, I need to pay more attention also as my kids began to approach that age as well. The dr T project has been a lot of fun. Probably the most rewarding thing I've done, in terms of liberal arts education, pure liberal arts education.

Fred Lawrence: So I wonder if you have for us, help us build our bookshelves, our own liberal arts curriculum, if you will, a couple of book suggestions on the one hand for people who are new to some of these topics and are looking for ways in, and then on the other hand, people with some background but are intrigued and would like to go a little further. Some of them may even be some of the works that you've already referred to.

Shawkat Toorawa: Sure. So for Arabic literature, even though the Library of Arabic Literature, the outfit I'm associated with, has produced a very good anthology, which I do recommend, it's just called a *Library of Arabic Literature Anthology*, I think the better anthology is probably still, *Night & Horses & the Desert* by Robert Irwin, which I believe was then reissued under the title, the Penguin Book of Classical Arabic literature or something. But the key thing is Robert Irwin and his edition.

There's also a lovely, lovely collection in the Everyman Library, *Arabic Poems*, edited by Marle Hammond. Poetry is the prestige form in Arabic, and that is really a lovely snapshot. They are of course only snapshots, but they're, I think, a good place to start if one wants to read the actual material in the original. A recent book that we published, I recommend very highly, it's called *A Physician on the Nile*, and it's the translation of an account by a Baghdad-based physician who goes to Egypt.

For the Qur'an, it's exploded, Qur'anic studies has exploded. There's just a lot out there now for someone who wants an in-depth discussion of it, I think probably the best thing is still, I believe it's called *Discovering the Qur'an* by Neal Robinson, an excellent, detailed introduction. There are a lot of primers out there, some are good, some are less good, but I think that Robinson, you can't go wrong with Robinson.

Fred Lawrence: Thank you for that, those are great. Your enthusiasm for your fields, very much plural, is infectious, and I know that you must bring that to your students at Yale as you have at other schools before that. We are very grateful that you are bringing it to many campuses as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar. Thank you for your participation in the

program and for your dedication to liberal arts in its broadest form, and thanks for joining me today on Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa.

Shawkat Toorawa: Thanks very much, it's a real honor.

Fred Lawrence: This podcast is produced by Phantom Center Media and Entertainment. Kojin Toshiro is Lead Producer and mixed this episode. Michelle Baker is Editor and co-Producer and Hadley Kelly is the Phi Beta Kappa producer on the show. Our theme song is Back to Back by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the work of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and our Visiting Scholar program, please visit [pbk.org](http://pbk.org). Thanks for listening. I'm Fred Lawrence, until next time.

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