

Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics

Nikki Keddie and Rudi Matthee, eds.

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Ever since the publication of James Morier's *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (London: J. Murray, 1824) in the early nineteenth century, many authors have tried to make sense of the Iranians' attitudes, views, and approaches to the outside world. One of the most recent works in this area is *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and*

Cultural Politics, edited by Nikki R. Keddie and Rudi Matthee. This volume contains interesting articles that will certainly contribute, in Keddie's words, "to a better understanding of many aspects of Iran's recent history" (p. 10). The editors also hope that, by way of this book's "modest contribution" to the field of knowledge, "[w]estern leaders will gain a greater acquaintance with this culture, as well as with the reasons for Iran's past reactions against the West, and especially the U.S." (p. 10).

The book is roughly divided into five parts, starting from an overview of Iran's cultural politics from the Safavid period (1501-1722) onward. This section briefly discusses Iran's relationship with its South Asian neighbors and looks into the ever-changing ethnic and tribal relationships both within and outside Iran. The second part links some aspects of the Safavid period's sociopolitical and cultural life to the Qajar (1796-1921) and Pahlavi (1925-79) periods. This section explores such interesting notions as the evolving nature of Iranian nationalism, Iranian views about outsiders, nineteenth-century travel literature in Iran, and some impacts of earlier missionary girls' schools in Iran. The third part discusses the new political culture in the Islamic Republic and its global dimensions, covering such areas as the Iranian women's movement and its international character, the image of "self" and "other" in school textbooks, and the international successes "of Iranian films under a clerical regime" (p. 254).

Iran's political and cultural relationships with the Muslim world are discussed in the fourth part. In this section, such issues as "the failure of [the] Islamic Republic's pan-Islamic program," along with the impact of Iran-based revolutionary Islamic ideas on Egypt, Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan, are explored. And finally, part five looks into the politics of Iran's international relations. In this section, in an article titled "Iran's Foreign Policy: A Revolution in Transition," Gary Sick highlights "the power of the reform movement and the near-impossibility of putting the genie back in the bottle ..." (p. 372). According to him, "[i]t was one of the great ironies of the Iranian revolution that its most significant 'export' to its neighbors in the Middle East might prove to be a model of democratizing system within an Islamic context" (p. 373).

The book thus tackles a variety of contemporary and old issues regarding the cultures, politics, geographies, religions, and histories of Iran and its diverse inhabitants. The contributors come from various scholarly backgrounds and try to situate Iran within the current "new world order." In terms of cultural and ethnic heterogeneity in the country, a most important contribution comes through F. Kashani-Sabet's essay "Cultures of

Iranianness: The Evolving Polemic of Iranian Nationalism.” Here the author explores variegated manifestations of nationality and nationalism in Iran as they reach their highest expression by way of Persian nationalism during the Pahlavi era. The author rightly observes that “by tracing the articulations of Iranianness for over a century, one is struck by the difference in emphasis placed by various nationalities on the basis of nationhood” (p. 178). Such an observation goes against a dominant view held and nurtured by a powerful segment of Iranian authorities and intellectuals who have tried, over the years, to present a monocultural and monolingual image of Iran to the outside world.

The overt and covert denial of difference and diversity is a legacy of the absolute monarchism of the Pahlavi period that, surprisingly, has continued in the Islamic Republic. In an examination of Iranian “post-revolutionary textbooks,” Golnar Mehran establishes that “[t]he national character presented in schoolbooks undermines ethnic and linguistic diversity ... in the country” (pp. 248-49). Likewise, in an interesting article exploring the changing relationships among the Turks, Persians, and Arabs, T. J. Barfield concludes that “the modern nation of Iran itself was the by-product of the struggles between successive dynasties and tribal confederations within and outside of Iran” (p. 85). Barfield is quick to add that “[t]hrough Iran may now have transcended these roots as it enters a new millennium, the roots are still clearly there” (p. 85).

Although such authors as Kashani-Sabet, Barfield, and Mehran seek to discuss the pluralist nature of Iranian society, their discussions barely scratch the surface and fail to tackle the real and concrete issues emerging from difference and diversity. This is a major shortcoming for a book that tries to analyze the Iranians’ cultural interactions and politics. After all, the people constituting Iran’s surrounding world are the same Arabs, Turks, Baluchs, Kurds, Turkomans, Afghans, Armenians, and Azeris whose coethnics also happen to constitute the majority of Iran’s inhabitants. An equitable and humane treatment of these major nationalities and groups inside Iran would certainly serve as a positive step toward an honest and constructive interaction with the surrounding world.

What is missing from the discussions in *Iran and the Surrounding World* is an articulation of the fact that Iran is, and has always been, a multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual society, and the implications that acknowledging this fact would entail in the contemporary age. Despite 80 years of state-sponsored assimilatory policies and politics, no more than half of Iran’s inhabitants speak Farsi as their mother tongue. Ethnic diver-

sity and cultural plurality in Iranian society are concrete facts that ought to be addressed in accordance with the principles of human rights, justice, and equal citizenship. As the country's numerical majority, members of the non-Persian ethnic groups and nationalities should be accorded equal rights vis-à-vis the Persians in terms of the presentation and promotion of their languages, histories, cultures, and ways of life. To represent such an extraordinary diversity as mere tokenism through an exotic, superficial image for tourist attraction and the like will not do justice either to Iran or its inhabitants. Nor will it offer an objective account of Iran's cultures, ethnicities, languages, and politics to the outside world.

Overall, *Iran and the Surrounding World* is an interdisciplinary source of information about Iranian politics and society that will appeal to all those concerned with developments in Iranian studies. I recommend this volume to historians, anthropologists, sociologists, policy makers, and all those interested in Iran, Islam, and the Middle East. This timely scholarship is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on Iran.

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