

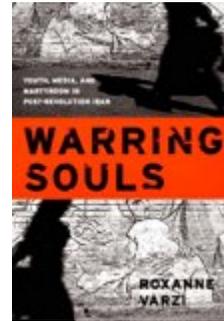
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Roxanne Varzi. *Warring Souls: Youth, Media and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran*. London and Durham: Duke University Press, 2006. xiii + 269 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3721-8.

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Iranian Youth, Disillusion, and Identity

Roxanne Varzi is currently an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. She recounts the experiences and psychology of Iranian youth, in particular, those who came of age entirely in the Islamic Republic. Varzi received the first Fulbright awarded for research in Iran since the Iranian revolution. In *Warring Souls*, she draws on her experience in Iran in addition to ethnographic research conducted between 1991 and 2000 in Tehran. Varzi examines the construction of identity among Iranian youth in the post-revolution environment and, in particular, the role of propaganda, murals, media, and film in shaping this identity. She explores the way that the state used images to create a truly “Islamic” republic and the effect of this policy on the lives and development of young people under the regime. She argues that, in post-revolution Iran, self-annihilation and self-construction occur in tandem. The author states that this book is about “the intersection of religion, vision, and power, and whether the individual ultimately has the power to turn an image off” (p. 7).

This book contains eight chapters. Each chapter opens with a quote that speaks to the overall theme of the chapter. In the introduction, entitled, “Divination: An Archeology of the Unknown,” Varzi describes how she conducted her research. To learn about the Iranian people, her uncle advised her to study the poets, Sa’adi, Hafiz, Khayyam, and Rumi, since Iranians have used poetry as a metaphor to describe the physical world as well as transcend it. It is through poetry that one can

say things that cannot be communicated literally. Along with its rich literary traditions, Iran has a long heritage of Sufi mysticism, which also relies on metaphors to talk about the human relationship with God. Throughout the book, Varzi heeds her uncle’s advice and cites various poets and draws allegorical metaphors with Sufi mysticism to construct a “reality” of post-1979 Iran, paying particular attention to her generation.

Varzi uses interviews and experiences recorded in her own journal of her time in Iran in addition to the journal entries of young Iranian students with whom she formed focus groups to supplement her research. In some cases, mostly concerning the Iran-Iraq war, fictional characters are created through a synthesis of different experiences and accounts to capture the complexity of attitudes and opinions among Iranian youth. Varzi explores the way that the state used images to create a truly “Islamic” republic, and the effect of this policy on the lives and development of young people under the regime. Chapter 1, “The Image of the Hidden Master,” opens with a chilling description of a graveyard full of martyrs, each grave with a young man’s smiling face on the front and the leader, Ayatollah Khomeini’s picture, staring out on the back. During the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, the revolutionary leader’s penetrating gaze could be found on more than just tombstones; it was pinned to soldiers, known as Basij. Varzi describes the triumph of Ayatollah Khomeini over the Shah’s regime and Khomeini’s return to Iran as a religious and political leader.

Chapter 2, "Mystic States: Martyrdom in the Making of the Islamic Republic," describes how Iraq's invasion strengthened the power of Khomeini. The metaphor of the tragedy of Karbala and the theme of martyrdom of Imam Husayn were effectively used as propaganda to make the Iraqi army much stronger and better equipped. All the walls and billboards were plastered with images of Iranian soldiers who died as martyrs in the battlefields fighting the Iraqi army. Varzi notes the many streets that were re-named in the honor of these martyrs.

Chapter 3, "Shooting Soldiers Shooting Film: The Cinema of the Iranian Sacred Defense," is about the films that came directly from the front line of the war; these were edited in Tehran and aired every night on television, thus entering the homes of Iranians. Varzi examined work of Morteza Avini, a Basij and a filmmaker who made the film series *Revayat-e Fath*, the longest running film series on the Iran-Iraq war. The movie was state-sanctioned to show the glories of war, not just the death and destruction. Morteza Avini's goal was to show faith, a difficult concept to document. The document was filmed on the fronts. Morteza and some of his crew died in action. Varzi interviewed Morteza's brother, Mohammad, to obtain information about him. Mohammad told Varzi, "the war was an experience (like the journey), 'a gift' given to the soldiers by their Imam.... [T]he Imam taught us how to live, to see the world, and the boys at the front experienced these teachings in a stronger way, especially the experience of death" (p. 82).

Chapter 4, "Visionary States: Inhabiting the City Inhabiting the Mind," is a description of life in Tehran after the war and how the government enforced the ideal Islamic state. In this chapter, the author makes use of the journal entries she received from her focus groups in Tehran as well as on her personal journals. Everything that occupied the public sphere was created to reinforce an Islamic identity, from murals of martyrs to paintings of clergy. The government started to regulate men's clothing and imposed mandatory *hijab* for women.

Chapter 5, "Shifting Subjects: Public Law and Private Selves," aims at showing how a collective public identity is at odds with private, individual identities. In other words, there is a double-standard life behavior among the youth of the upper-middle class in Iran, the public portrait of a false faith combined with a secular private life.

Chapter 6, "Majnun's Mask: Sex, Suicide and Semi-otic Malfunctioning," talks about the two opposing worlds of public and private lives for youth. We hear Varzi's tales of drug addition in Iran among the disillusioned former Basijis, and the issues of prostitution and HIV. The Islamic clergy blames these vices on Western infiltration, but it is hard to know if they would exist or not without Western influence, because it is impossible to separate the two worlds. Perhaps this chapter could have been expanded since the issues discussed in it are ones that many societies are facing.

In Chapter 7, "The Ghost Machine: (Just War?) Reminders and Reminders of War," Varzi states, "for the most part, the repetitive reminder of the war has worked against the regime" (p. 176). All the uncensored films about the heroic martyrdom promoted by the government are reminders of the "violent and empty effort" of a nation which lost a large segment of its future generation. This chapter focuses on the subject of young men lost on the battlefield as either prisoners of war or missing in action. Of those who survived the battlefields, the majority are often mere vestiges of their former selves due to the horrors they encountered.

Chapter 8, "Reforming Religious Identity in Post-Khatami Iran," deals with 1997 after the election of president Khatami, and how the strict rules relaxed. The question is whether the Islamic Republic actually created Islamic subjects. Varzi's statistics indicate that 75 percent of Iranian citizens and 90 percent of the young Iranians do not pray. Due to the problem of drug addiction and suicides, the Foundation for Youth Affairs was established to research youth by taking polls. One of the biggest problems is that pollsters are not welcome, since the Iranian families are suspicious of the motives.

The conclusion, "Mehdi's Climb," is an interesting observation on her part. She explains a personal experience in a hiking event with young students and their hiking leader. As the weather got bad and she decided to turn back, none of the students wanted to turn away or go against their leader, in spite of the possible danger they were facing. She concluded that while young students could meet their death in a mudslide, the vision of a pleasant afternoon in paradise was worth the risk.

Varzi states that young Iranians are beginning to "look inward" and recognize that individuals could create a society that does not need to "manipulate images" to create a "surface" that is at best deceptive and at worst destructive (p. 215). Young people hide their actions, as well as the actions of those they love to protect them, and then must deal with the guilt that follows. Varzi attributes the rise of suicide, alcoholism, and drug abuse among Iranian youths to this reality. She also uses the rise of these vices as an indication that the Islamic state

has failed, through images, to create a more Islamic society. However, this idea seems to be based almost entirely on the upper-middle class group living in Tehran, who clearly do not make up the majority of the generation. It would be interesting to hear what the youth living in places other than Tehran and those who do not have the opportunity to attend the university think about “westernification,” Islam, education, and their future. Another point concerns the format of this book, which was probably based on publisher requirements; it contains about forty-four pages of endnotes. I find it annoying to always be flipping back and forth, checking endnotes. Perhaps footnotes would have been a better option.

At times, her poetic language and lengthy metaphors distracted the reader from the anthropological study and the substantive arguments intended to support her basic thesis. She is knowledgeable in her study of war documentary films, and her film analysis reveals important themes regarding sacrifice and martyrdom. This is a well-researched book with a good ethnographic and anthropological methodology. Her study also shows how opinions

of Iranians and of the government have changed over time. As she states, “The cathartic qualities of these reminders [images of war and martyrdom] that are meant to inspire nationalism have instead given rise to emotions of anger and disillusionment with the regime” (p. 176). The author has made good use of available literature on the Islamic Republic and the issue of imagery, as in works of Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi. In my own book—*The Veil Unveiled: Hijab in Modern Culture* (2001 and 2003) – I discuss the creation of martyr images and governmental propaganda promoting the images of Iranian women as supporters of martyrs in their various capacities as wife, sister, daughter, and mother. This kind of specific reference could bolster Varzi’s argument that the Islamic Republic of Iran did not make the youth more religious. Varzi’s research contributes significantly to the scholarship that attempts to understand post-revolution Iran and the lasting effects of rapid and radical regime change. It is a welcome addition for the students in anthropology, sociology, and contemporary Iranian studies.

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