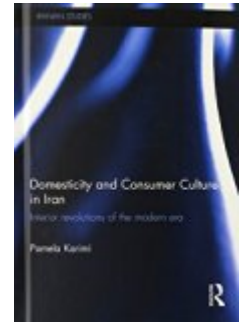


Pamela Karimi. *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran: Interior Revolutions of the Modern Era.* Iranian Studies Series. New York: Routledge, 2013. Illustrations. 262 pp. \$145.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-78183-1.



Reviewed by Carel Bertram

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Pamela Karimi describes her book accurately as “a survey of Iranian domesticity and its transformations” (p. 11). With an emphasis on interaction with the West, the book begins in the late Qajar period (1794-1925) and ends in the postrevolutionary present, even into the early twenty-first century. A major focus is the pivotal, Western-oriented interim of Pahlavi Iran (1925-79), particularly the post-World War II period as Iran negotiated oil wealth and imports from the West. The author argues that the most important import was a consumer mentality that introduced Western household items and Western housing as objects of desire, with varied success and with a variety of repercussions.

This book does not deal with “domesticity” as usually understood, that is, as life inside the house. Instead, it investigates the *idea* of the house (and female homemaker) as a construct that is conceptualized and instrumentalized from outside it. It is from the outside that what might better be called “the domestic sphere” is examined in tandem with the development of con-

sumer culture. Karimi documents this interaction through public sources, such as historical records, designs of both palaces and houses, and commentary on and images of domestic life in magazines and journals. Her analysis shows how an inundation of consumer culture in Iran increasingly produced and appropriated Western styles in facades, floor plans, and furnishings, and introduced an image of a woman who would assimilate these as the ideal, modern Iranian woman.

The dissemination and assimilation of this Western image was a visual one: for example, images cut from Western magazines, of women doing “Western things”—like sitting in a cozy chair in a Western living room as the husband reads a newspaper and a child plays with a doll—were used in magazines of the 1950s to sell lifestyles as well as room heaters. These were complemented by images in Western-funded and Western-directed home-economics manuals for young Iranian women, which recycled Western illustrations of women arranging flowers and hanging pictures in Western interiors, images that were implicitly

normative as instructions about “good taste.” US President Harry S. Truman’s Point IV program even subsidized modern model homes to train young women to expect, demand, and negotiate Western housing, in other words, houses that opened to the street with balconies and plate glass windows, and that needed refrigerators to be complete. These mirrored what urban Iranians saw not only in magazines but also all around them, such as Western company neighborhoods patterned on an American suburbia of the 1950s, or as large, free-standing single-family dwellings designed by Iranian or Western architects. A concomitant and laudatory rhetoric assured that this was the lifestyle of an efficient and hygienic modernity.

But not all the rhetoric was laudatory. Karimi documents how what she terms a “spiritual elite,” that is religious-minded intellectuals (but not clergy), made a counterclaim on domestic space. For instance, a manual for daily religious practice reflecting the 1970s “addresses everyday consumer behavior and residential spaces ... and attempts to classify them as acceptable or not based on traditional Islamic dichotomy of purity vs. filth” (p. 122); it was a manual to keep the consumer alert to nonconsumer values. Central to Karimi’s argument is that these manuals identified the spiritual dangers of the West by using an imported, Western consumer language: images of Western goods, from alcohol bottles to un-curtained, privacy-exposing, plate-glass windows, became items of *anti*-desire, as their captions—instead of sales hype—carried moralizing Qur’anic verses with injunctions against their purchase or use. Thus, these manuals were also involved in the circulation of Western consumer goods, albeit as an attractive way to “sell” religious values. Karimi confirms that all camps in the Pahlavi period participated in a thriving, Western style, public “market-place” of images.

The larger picture, then, is of a new consumer culture that both created and demanded what

Karimi variously but always correctly calls a culture of “montage,” or of “hybridity,” “collage,” “co-option,” “revising and bridging,” “overlaps,” or “cultural conversions.” It was this consumerist montage that was the new type of modernity. One example of montage is the domestic floor plans that were created in the mid-twentieth century as new housing was built to meet a crisis caused by massive urban renewal and rural to urban migrations. The plans varied according to income, but all attempted to bridge the modern, connecting the official support of small, nuclear families, as well as indoor plumbing and function-specific rooms, with a traditional, inward-focused house with a central courtyard surrounded by areas that served several purposes (at different times of day) and that were used by extended families according to older rules of gender. An example of the acknowledgment, yet spiritual repugnance of the montage, was an articulation in the early Khomeini period, when joint Iranian-Western enterprises were spoken of as religiously prohibited, or “haram.”

Even a *lived* montage life was suggested, although anecdotally. In 1979, an American historian teaching in Shiraz wrote about visiting a home that was in all visible ways an American replica. But he was astonished when he entered the kitchen. “There, seated on the floor, next to a gigantic American refrigerator that dispensed ice-cubes from its door, were two women in ... chador bent over and plucking feathers from two dead chickens” (p. 118). Yet the reader is given no systematic entrée into the house as it might be accessed from ethnographies, or even novels, stories, or films. These might offer information about the degree to which, the way in which, and the meanings by which real people, especially those from different backgrounds and with different spatial memories, resisted, assimilated, or negotiated the external onslaught of Western goods and lifestyles. This is one of several promises of the prologue that remains, unfortunately, unrealized: although Karimi shows how the Iranian house (as

a concept) “has served as the place of encounter with the ‘other,’” she does not address identity or lifestyle responses of real people, in other words, “the culture of twentieth century Iran as it manifested itself *within* the home” (pp. 6, 5, italics mine).

A methodology that takes “soundings” from a lengthy time period (a Qajar palace in 1887, residential towers in 1977, a residential project in 2007) and collects an enormous amount of information faces the difficulty of making it all cohere. This weakness speaks to inattentive editing by Routledge, for the very presence of so much and such varied information—for example, records of Anglo-American missionaries; the voices of Iranian political, religious, and academic figures; the views of both Western and Iranian educators, architects, and purveyors of house-related furnishings; views of palace and apartment interiors; housing complexes; floor plans; and images from popular magazines and religious manuals—has been allowed to remain un-corralled rather than organized as a specifically contextualized or theorized argument. Even the book’s main chapters and subsections are not clearly integrated in light of one another.

This weakness is, however, also a strength. In this volume, just about everything that was circulating about the personal house in the public sphere is offered and addressed; and this wealth of information and sources indeed fulfills the promise of “a survey of Iranian domesticity and its transformations.” The author positions the reader in a complex, otherwise hard to access, visual world and identifies just how this is the place in which an important conversation is loudly taking place.

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