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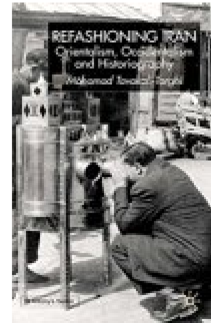
Mohamed Tavakoli-Targhi. *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography.* Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. xvi + 216 pp. $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-94922-1.



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"*Refashioning Iran* is an historiographic project that challenges the conventional national histories of Iran, which often depict modernity as an historical epoch inaugurated by 'Westernizing' and state-centralizing reforms. By viewing modernity as a global process that engendered various strategies of self-fashioning, this study seeks to break away from the dehistoricizing implications of 'Westernization' theories that are predicated upon the temporal assumption of non-contemporaneity of European and non-European societies" (p. ix-x).

Thus begins the project of historian Mohamed Tavakoli-Targhi to re-orient the study of modern Iran. Unlike Edward Said, who cavalierly assumed Oriental others could not possibly "represent themselves," Tavakoli-Targhi provides an in-depth analysis of Persian prose texts that not only responded to Western texts but reversed the gaze and interpreted European others through a Persian mirror. The result is an important theoretical study well informed by textual examples, history written with a concern for historiographic insight. The structure of the book, as the author notes, follows the episodic narrative of the Arabian Nights rather than a straightforward historical monograph. After an initial chapter on the heterotopia of Persian prose texts, the second chapter posits a clear and compelling challenge to simplistic discursive damning of the genesis of modern Orientalism. Both of these chapters focus on Persianate scholarship in India as the British were establishing a colony there. The following chapter of "Persianate Europology" balances the focus in most studies on how the West imagined its Orient. A chapter "Imagining European Women" is certainly a valuable resource to consult after reading Said's elaboration of the Frenchman Flaubert among the exotic dancers of Egypt. The final three chapters articulate the symbolic capital from which the modern nation of Iran has been imagined, a balance not simply between Islamic tradition and modernity but also with a golden-age pre-Islamic past.

This book should first of all be read as a valuable corrective to the flaws in Said's influential *Orientalism* (1978). Post-colonial scholars have almost all lamented the fact that Said ignores the multiple voices of real Orientals, including a large corpus of texts written in the Orient to counter Western Orientalism. As Tavakoli-Targhi documents, the early and formative stage of Orientalism "was not a discourse of domination, but a reciprocal relation between European and Indian scholars" (p. 23). In discussing Europe's "genesis amnesia," Tavakoli-Targhi shows how Bernard Lewis, who steadfastly refuses to think Orientals ever had an interest in the West, and Edward Said, who asserts that the hegemonizing discourse of Orientalism effectively prevented an Oriental response, are both wrong. In the specific case of philologist William Jones, local scholars like Tafazzul Husayn Khan (d. 1800) were an important source for "Orientalist" knowledge. Indeed, Tavakoli-Targhi coins a valuable term, "homeless texts," to cover the prose texts written in India but in Persian, which was the official language of India until it was abolished in 1830 (p. 9). We learn that Persianate scholars had access in their own language to the philosophy of Rene Descartes and medicinal analysis of William Harvey soon after this was available in the West (p. 10). So why have these indigenous texts not found a home in Western research? "By anticipating a period of decline that paved the way for the British colonization," argues Tavakoli-Targhi, "historians of Mughal

India have searched predominantly for facts that illustrate the backwardness and the disintegration of this empire" (p. 16). It is a tried and untrue practice: only finding what one looks for.

"The challenge of postcolonial historiography," suggests Tavakoli-Targhi, "is to re-historicize the processes that have been concealed and ossified by the Eurocentric accounts of modernity" (p. 33). As a trained historian, Tavakoli-Targhi proceeds within the well-honed critical guidelines of his discipline rather than whimsically reading in the open-ended but close-minded fashion of Said's contrapuntal additions to canonical authors like Jane Austen. Indeed, one of the strengths of this study is that it shows what theoretical rigor can achieve with previously unexamined historical resources rather than brandishing theoretical fads with imprecise application. The author makes no pretense of adopting the elusive label "post-colonial," and somehow manages to avoid quoting either Homi Bhabha or Gayatri Spivak. But his neologism of "voy(ag)eurs" (p. 38) is every bit as witty and pertinent as Bhabha's "dissemiNation."

To a certain extent Tavakoli-Targhi is able to reverse the gaze of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* by examining several prose accounts of real Persians who visited Europe. Of special interest is Mirza Abu Talib's de Tocquevillian accounting of English virtues and vices; part of this 1802 account was translated into English in 1824. Among the English virtues were self-respect, acknowledgement of individual achievements, self-imposed limits and the linking of collective and individual welfare. As for the vices, always the more interesting in hindsight, a certain irreligiosity tops the list; this is blamed for the high levels of dishonesty. Also prevalent was an arrogance over past economic and political success, coupled with avarice in daily affairs. The English were further accused of being too enamored of a life of ease (at least the upper crust) and of ill-temper. All of this, argues Tavakoli-Targhi (p. 53) was not simply ethnocentric rendering, since these Persianate writers "censured their own society" as well.

One of the more relevant chapters for this forum is the account of "Farangi" women. "The eroticized depiction of European women by male travelers engendered a desire for that 'heaven on earth' and its uninhibited and fairy-like residents who displayed their beauty and mingled with men" (p. 54). Consider the enthusiasm of Mirza Abu al-Hasan Khan Ilchi, reporting an 1809-10 trip to England: "In the gardens and on the paths, beauteous women shine like the sun and rouse the envy of the stars, and the houris of paradise blush with shame to look upon the rose-cheeked beauties of the earth below. In absolute amazement, I said to Sir Gore Ouseley: If there be paradise on earth, It is this, oh! It is this!" (pp. 55-56). For others, the "houris" were transformed less poetically into witches. The important point is that misogyny and ethnocentrism, the hallmark of Orientalist travelogue rendering of Oriental women, are also in evidence for Persian narration of Western females. For both, the body of the "other" woman became a "site for sexual and political imagination" (p. 61). Indeed, the same myths abound in both gazing contexts. Compare Said's [1] infamous libeling of Lewis's staid prose on "revolution" as really a statement about Arab male impotence with the assumption noted here by a number of Persian writers that female libertines resulted in Europe from the men's sexual impotence (p. 67). In addition to the pornographic trope, well received by the more conservative religious elements at home, there was considerable interest in the progress women achieved through education in Europe.

Unfortunately, the observations represented in the one chapter on gender do not reappear in other parts of the text. There is certainly a more expansive study to be made of these in order to counter the plethora of studies that dissect the chauvanist Western gaze of Oriental women. A more direct comparison of Persian travel accounts with Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* would certainly make a fascinating literary study. At one point Tavakoli-Targhi notes that Montesquieu adopted some of his ideas from real-life Persians (e.g., Muhammad Riza Bayk, an envoy sent to France) (p. 75). Another issue worth pursuing, at least by the interested reader, is the symbolic role of dress and costume. Dressing like a Persian in Europe was almost always interpreted as a gender statement. Ironically, European dress began to be adopted in Iran primarily as military uniform.

This is a study well worth reading by anyone interested in what may be called Orientalism in reverse; certainly it will be of interest for students of the history of modern Iran (although the book basically stops short at the start of the twentieth century). While not a coherent unity, the individual chapters still have much to offer. Expansion on some of the themes, especially the gender material, would be a welcome future contribution by the author. There are a number of editing slips, most focused on pp. 12 and 13 (e.g., "were" for "was" on p. 12; "an" for "and" on p. 13; "was" for "were" on p. 13). In the end, I think it fair to say that "other historians of Persianate modernity" (p. 143) will find much in this exploratory test to pursue.

Note

[1]. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 315.

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