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IRAN

Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran, by Fatemeh Keshavarz. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007. x + 165 pages. Index to p. 174. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Nasrin Rahimieh

Jasmine and Stars is a passionate and poetic supplement to the monolithic and unforgiving image of post-revolutionary Iran that has gained currency through best-selling titles like Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*.

Since its publication in 2003, Nafisi's book has become one of the most widely read books in North America. Some of her critics have speculated that the book's popularity is rooted in its representation of life in the Islamic Republic as relentlessly oppressive, particularly as experienced by women. Writing from the position of a former professor of English literature in Iran, Nafisi zeroes in on repressive measures aimed at limiting American influence in Iranian life and letters. Over against the ever-tightening rein of the Islamic Republic, Nafisi posits a gathering of a group of her female students at her home devoted to reading some of the more canonical works of English literature. This book club of sorts becomes a safe haven where the austerity of life in post-revolutionary and war-torn Iran can be temporarily suspended or at least freely challenged through an engagement with the life of the imagination. The Iran of the time, Nafisi argues, is so invested in revolutionary zeal that it loses sight of the value of literature and the arts.

Fatemeh Keshavarz's *Jasmine and the Stars* challenges and rebuts Nafisi's depiction of Iran as a country that has turned its back to the life of the mind. Classifying Nafisi's work as New Orientalist, Keshavarz takes issue with its single-minded focus on Iran's cultural values as irrevocably different from those of the West. Like the European Orientalists who became the first purveyors of the image of the Orient as the region exempt from the order of time and

progress, the New Orientalists, Keshavarz contends, have fortified barriers between cultures. If the Orientalists of the earlier periods were European and American travelers, the New Orientalists are native informers who, speaking from a position of authority and authenticity, dehumanize their own compatriots and wall them off from the rest of humanity.

Weaving together elements of her own life history and her knowledge of Persian literature, Keshavarz takes her readers on a journey of discovery. Her aim is to offer antidotes to the New Orientalist narratives and to open a new vista on "the peaceful and enriching gifts that Iran has to offer" (p. 7). Speaking directly to her readers, Keshavarz draws on her own gift of poetic voice in the six chapters of her book. Beginning with reminiscences about growing up in Iran, she next introduces us to the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad, a young female poet who challenged social orthodoxies and gender relations. Next we gaze at a portrait of one of Keshavarz's uncles, who despite his career in the military retained his artistic temperament. The following chapter is devoted to Shahnush Parsipur, a woman writer whose boldness in the early days after the revolution stands in stark contrast to Nafisi's totalizing image of Iran. This chapter is followed by a detailed analysis of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Here Keshavarz demonstrates factual errors, misrepresentations of Iranian culture, and the erasure of an old native poetic and literary tradition more than equal to the masterpieces of English literature Nafisi posits as the sole source of nourishment for her students in Iran.

In the final chapter of her book, Keshavarz reconnects with her personal life experiences and highlights the continuities between pre- and post-revolutionary Iran's cultural life. She ends her book with a moving poem about an uncle's succumbing to Alzheimer's disease. This ending is a poignant reminder of how easy it is to lose sight of the human being behind the shadows.

Like Nafisi whose work instigated the writing of *Jasmine and Stars*, Keshavarz believes in the salutary function of the life of letters, but, unlike Nafisi, she insists that the revolution has not banished her Iranian

compatriots from this domain. She sees the stories she recounts in her book as a gift and an invitation to see beyond fear and to bridge the divide that threatens to further separate Iranians and Americans.

Dr. Nasrin Rahimieh, Maseeh Chair and Director, Dr. Samuel M. Jordan Center for Persian Studies and Culture & Professor of Comparative Literature, University of California, Irvine

Iran's Nuclear Ambitions, by Shahram Chubin. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006. xx + 148 pages. Chron. Notes to p. 204. Gloss. to p. 208. Index to p. 222. Figures. \$32.95 cloth; \$12.95 paper.

Reviewed by Paul Kerr

As the crisis over Iran's nuclear program has persisted, there has been no shortage of simplistic and ill-informed commentary regarding Tehran's diplomatic strategy and tactics. Many observers have attempted to analyze Iran's apparent determination to peruse a uranium enrichment program despite resistance from the international community. But these analyses frequently lack an adequate discussion of the situation from Iran's point of view.

Shahram Chubin's *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* is, therefore, a welcome addition to the literature, providing a thorough, well-researched account of the Iranian regime's nuclear diplomacy. The Director of Studies at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Chubin has marshaled an impressive amount of material about a complex subject, while still producing a readable, concise account. Despite the evolving nature of the Iranian nuclear crisis, the book is nevertheless useful reading for anyone wishing to understand the current crisis.

The author recounts Iran's diplomacy with all of the major players (including the United States, Russia, and several European countries) since the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) began to investigate Iran's nuclear program in 2002. Chubin's account ends around March 2006,

shortly after Iran's nuclear file was referred to the UN Security Council and several months after Tehran defied the international community by resuming work on its enrichment program. Since then, the Security Council has imposed sanctions on Iran for its persistent refusal to suspend its nuclear program and cooperation with the IAEA's investigation of its nuclear programs.

Chubin argues that Iran seeks a nuclear weapons capability for various reasons. These include enhancing Iran's regional status and providing the regime with "domestic legitimation," as well as "a greater voice in international relations" (p. 137). Of these reasons, the first two are the most important. For example, Chubin points out that the regime in Tehran has gone to great lengths to enhance its domestic prestige by portraying international opposition to its enrichment program as an effort to deny Iran its right to acquire peaceful nuclear technology. Chubin, however, seems to place the most emphasis on Iran's desire to bolster its regional status through its nuclear program. He writes that Tehran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability

symbolizes Iran's quest for regional leadership. It provides the means to block a U.S.-inspired regional order, which is seen as domineering, hegemonic, and imperial (p. 134).

Describing Iran's regional ambitions, Chubin states that,

Iran seeks a regional order in which outside powers are excluded and in which it plays a leading role in the Caucasus, Persian Gulf and broader Middle East, and parts of South Asia (p. 134).

The book's strength is its description of Iran's nuclear decision-making process. Chubin notes — correctly, in my view — that Tehran's "decisions reflect institutional inputs and interest group biases, with policies emerging that are not a product of a unitary system" (p. 37). Chubin argues

would have been more serviceably explained in an appended glossary than in disparate footnotes. Some of those unfamiliar terms are even left without explanation and merely set in italics – this strategy, of course, serves the readers no more than perhaps in exculpating them from not understanding.

Nevertheless, the well-known as well as the new voices brought together in this anthology make it well worth reading. It is not the surprise packet of female suffering, but the narrative variety and imminent strength of the different short stories that make the collection's attraction; and, finally, the subversive power glimpsed at here and there in the texts is beautifully matched by the equally attractive cover: a photograph of two veiled women in profile, standing in front of the door of what might be a transformer station, a danger sign above them (and the door), and the shadow of a butterfly just about to leave the picture's confinements.

Notes

1. After *A Walnut Sapling on Masih's Grave and Other Stories by Iranian Women*, ed. John Green, Farzin Yazdanfar (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993), *In a Voice of their Own: a Collection of Stories by Iranian Women Written since the Revolution of 1979*, comp. and tr. Franklin Lewis and Farzin Yazdanfar (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers 1996) and *A Feast in the Mirror: Stories by Contemporary Iranian Women*, ed. and tr. Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami and Sholeh Vatanabadi (Boulder CO/London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).
2. Twelve authors present in the collection have been translated and printed in non-specialist publications before, in part together with other stories of theirs, partly with the same ones: for example, Daneshvar's 'To Whom Shall I Say Hello?' in *Daneshvar's Playhouse: A Collection of Stories*, translated by Maryam Mafi, Washington DC: Mage Publishers, 1989; Taraqqi's 'The Shemiran Bus' under the title 'Aziz Aqa's Gold Filling' in Heshmat Moayyad (ed.), *Stories from Iran: A Chicago Anthology 1921–1991*, Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 1991. Taraqqi's 'A House in Heaven', Bahrami's 'Garden of Sorrow', Ravanipour's 'Mana, Kind Mana', all appeared in *In a Voice of Their Own*; Vafi's 'My Mother Behind the Glass' in *A Feast in the Mirror*. 'Mahdokht' by Parsipour is an extract from her novella *Zanān bedun-e mardān*, published in English as *Women Without Men*, translated by Kamran Talattof and Jocelyn Sharlet, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1998.
3. Basmenji claims the short story to have been published 'in the 1960s' while according to Moayyad it was first published in the expatriate journal *Omid* in 1988 (cf. Heshmat Moayyad, *Stories from Iran*, p. 403).

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Martyrdom in Literature: Visions of Death and Meaningful Suffering in Europe and the Middle East from Antiquity to Modernity *Literaturen im Kontext*, Volume 17

Edited by FRIEDERIKE PANNEWICK

Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2004

369 pp.

ISBN 3 895 00382 4

This volume of 18 essays is organised into four sections, or chapters as referred to by the editor with the following headings: 'Concepts of Martyrdom', 'The Performative Power of Martyrdom', 'Eros and Thanatos' and 'Critique and Deconstructions of Martyrdom'.

The idea behind this compelling collection emerged from two international and interdisciplinary colloquia held in 2002 and 2003 at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin (Institute for Advanced Studies) as part of a Working Group's Project, Cultural Mobility in Near Eastern Literatures under the rubric of Modernity and Islam. As the editor points out, the debates and the discussions following these academic conferences gave shape to the organising principles manifested in the volume. For the most part the contributors are from European institutions: Berlin, Bonn, Nijmegen, Freiburg, Heidelberg, Halle, Leipzig, Oxford and Yale.

The intellectual drive to study the concept of martyrdom within a historical and transcultural and religious context is to be applauded particularly at a time when much public and political discourse and media representations are obsessed with understanding 'suicide bombers' emerging from Muslim world. Whether lauded as heroes and martyrs or reviled as terrorists, the individual's sacrifice for the sake of a collective cause has necessitated grappling with this seemingly new problematic. There is even a new coterie of experts whose focus is trained on the psychological profile of the terrorist or suicide bomber. Interestingly few of these experts situate the phenomenon in an historical or Western or European framework, frequently relegating these acts of violence against the self and others to the realm of religious, more specifically, Islamic, fanaticism or fundamentalism.

As the essays in this collection illustrate, the willingness to sacrifice oneself for a cause, even a lost one, has a long history across the cultures of Europe and the Middle East. Moreover, the concepts of self-sacrifice and martyrdom these days uniquely identified with Islam could well have been informed by its Christian and pagan antecedents.

Pannewick's introduction provides a comprehensive and historical overview for the volume. Carefully situating the concept of martyrdom, she points out: 'Nobody is born a martyr; rather the martyr figure is based on the common agreement reached by groups that shape the views and opinions of a community' (p. 1). This central definition facilitates the appreciation of the enduring power of the concept across historical, religious, and cultural boundaries. Equally central to the understanding of the ensuing arguments is the functioning of the paradigm of martyrdom which 'helps to render experiences of despair and powerlessness meaningful, understandable and explainable. It is interesting to note that in violent conflicts in which both sides have to cope with martyrdom, it is frequently the case that both of these parties perceive themselves to be the victimized community defending its very existence' (Ibid.).

The decision to locate the analysis of the figure of the martyr in literature speaks to the contributors' conviction that the creation of a shared community draws on the power of the word and shared histories and/or myths. It is important to emphasise that the contributors have a broad understanding of the term literary, encompassing both the realm of the print, the verbal and the performative. The literary focus notwithstanding, the contributors have had to reach across the boundaries of methodology and specialisation in order to create a productive domain for interdisciplinary exchange at once sensitive to specificity and scholarly intelligibility.

Six of the essays are written in German, and the remainder are in English, making them readily accessible to scholars in Comparative Literature, Middle Eastern Studies and Cultural Studies. This is not to say that scholars of national literatures and Classicists will not find fascinating insights in specific chapters. For example, Dorothee Elm's 'Martyrdom Performed: On the Interrelation of Roman Comedy and Christian Martyrdom' would be of great interest to scholars working on the transfiguration of

genres. Still other essays focus on a particular linguistic or literary context. Stefan Leder's 'The Udhri Narrative in Arabic Literature' and Renate Jacobi's 'The Udhra: Love and Death in the Umayyad Period,' Sunil Sharma's 'the Sufi-Poet-Lover as Martyr: Attar and Hafiz in Persian Poetic Traditions' and Susanne Enderwitz's 'Liebe, Märtyrertum and Lohn im abbasidischen Gazal' are examples of this type.

In her essay, Renate Jacobi reveals the main characteristics of 'Udhri' love' as conceived in the Umayyad period as 'Love is decreed by God, a fate to be accepted with complete submission. Time does not touch it, independent of fulfillment or frustration' (p. 146). This leads to a complete faithfulness until death. The possibility of physical union through marriage provides a means of conforming to Islamic ethics. In the absence of such union, the lover remains chaste and hopes for unification after death. Total devotion underwrites a concept in which Jacobi locates a new symbolic code: "Udhri love is essentially self-destructive, the most poignant criticism imaginable of Umayyad social conditions' (Ibid.). Equally interesting is the observation that the Umayyad period is the 'only period of classical Arabic literature where love lyrics are addressed to free women. Later *ghazal* poetry either refers to slave girls, or is homoerotic, a consequence, among other reasons, of the separation of the sexes enforced from 'Abbasid times onwards more or less strictly up to modernity' (p. 147).

Stefan Leder's analysis focuses on the concept of ardent love, requiring self-sacrifice and death, and its placement within the boundaries of the socially and morally acceptable. We find interesting instances of adaptation such as drawing on religious tradition which 'produced a saying of the Prophet Mohammad, investing those who die from love with the title of martyrdom: "Who loves ardently (*ashīqa*), abstains and dies, dies a martyr"' (p. 183). He points out that beginning with the ninth century this saying is reproduced in treatises dealing with love. Yet these attempts at negotiating between passionate love and the religious and moral acceptability do not lead to conclusive evidence that 'sacrifice of one's life for the cause of love gained the reputation of an Islamic ideal' (Ibid.).

In 'The Sufi-Poet-Lover as Martyr,' Sunil Sharma sheds light on the 'collapse of the personae of sufi-martyr with poet-lover' as 'deeply embedded in the ways of reading *ghazal* in Persianate literatures, especially in post-Hafizian poetry' (p. 242). This study, part of a broader analysis of Persian biographical dictionaries, follows the trajectory of the martyr in Persian literary tradition from a 'sufi who conquers his carnal soul, then as the protagonist of lyric poetry who loves and is ready to die for his beloved, and finally in the amalgamation of both of these into the persona of the poet who holds the secrets to the unseen world' (Ibid.).

There is more than cultural and historical diversity represented in the chapters of this book. The essays also address critiques of powerful myths. The three essays in the last section all lay bare the process of critical self-reflection and questioning of long held beliefs. Particularly noteworthy is the revelation that critique and deconstruction of cherished ideals are not limited to the European and the post-Enlightenment tradition. Verena Klemm's 'The Deconstruction of the Martyrdom in Modern Arabic Novel' and Sonja Mejcher-Atassi's 'The Martyr and his Image' are masterfully placed along with Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus's "'Schöne Ungeheuer" and "menschliche Geschosse" – Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Walter Benjamin and Ernst Jünger über Märtyrer und Märtrerdamen'.

Verena Klemm's essay provides a particularly poignant example of the most recent instances of transformation in the concept of the martyr. Focusing on 'cosmopolitan Arab' writers (Rashīd al-Ḍa'if and Saḥar Khalīfa) who deconstruct the Arab-Islamic

cultural concept of hero and bring it into critical dialogue with the socio-political realities of the modern Middle East, she uncovers attempts at unsettling powerful discursive patterns which continue to privilege male power and reproduce violence. The novels Klemm examines, she points out, 'uncover the subterranean and secret connections between tradition, modern political ideology and the glorification of death in nationalist war' (p. 340). This essay and others in the last section of the book illustrate the dynamic nature of the concept of martyrdom and its ever shifting boundaries to either adapt to or question the ideals of a social and cultural collectivity.

What makes this book a pleasure to read is its juxtaposition of material from the ancient to the modern. To move from an essay on Classical Western Literature to medieval Persian and Arabic, to an analysis of Walter Benjamin and back to modern Arabic literature is a rare intellectual and scholarly treat. This form of interdisciplinary work could set an excellent model for both Comparatists and scholars of Cultural Studies in the North American context.

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