

The Image of Arabs in Modern Persian Literature, Joya Blondel Saad, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1996, ix + 139 pp., index, paper, ISBN 0-7618-0330-0

The Image of Arabs is an investigation through literary evidence of Iranian perceptions of self and other and how these figure in the construction of modern concepts of Iranian national identity and the "imagined political community." Knowing the subject matter, and the fact that the book originated as a Ph.D. dissertation (University of Austin, Texas, 1992), one might expect the text to be colored by the terminology and preconceptions of post-colonial and post-modernist discourse. However, the bibliography shows little concern with recent theory, the only exception being two references to Partha Chatterjee's *National Thought and the Colonial World* (1986) in the final pages of the book. Saad also relies on somewhat older secondary sources for the history of modern Iran (e.g., Bausani's *The Persians*, 1971) or the theories of nationalism, race and ethnicity (e.g., Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice*, 1954). The layout and print of the book are clear and easy on the eyes, with very few typographical errors: "shing" for shining (42), "bāgh" for *bāghcheh* in the title of Farrokhzad's poem *Delam barāye bāghcheh misūzad* (68), a missing "a" in the phrase "For while" (92), "the the" (113), and "Lost in the Crowd" should be italicized (122).

Though Saad works from the premise that literary works shape the ideological discourse that creates the nation, she concentrates not on theorizing that process of identity formation, but on cataloguing the disparate images of Arabs seen in the novels and poems of nine prominent Iranian writers of the twentieth century. Readers unfamiliar with modern Persian literature or the intellectual history of modern Iran will appreciate the relevant quotations culled from a number of each of these authors' works. However, the Arabs depicted in modern Persian literature tend to function as scenery or symbols, not as fully rounded characters, and in the works considered by Saad, we are restricted for the most part to momentary and incidental glimpses of individual Arabs. For want of stories with Arab characters cast as protagonists or in supporting roles (Hedayat's *Parvīn, dokhtar-e Sāsān* is the sole exception), Saad perforce resorts to consideration of abstract and symbolic representations of "the Arab" as historical conqueror of Iran. More problematically, ethnic Iranians by virtue of their knowledge of Arabic or their Islamic religiosity come to stand, according to Saad, for Arabness. *The Image of Arabs* focuses, then, less on the portrayal of Arabs than on Iranian intellectuals' conflicting views of Islam as either an integral and naturalized component of Iranian identity, or as an alien (i.e., Arab) and non-essential influence in Iran.

The chapter divisions—male writers and their views of the Arab (Chapter 2) vis-à-vis female authors' views of the Arab (Chapter 3), with Jalal Al-e Ahmad in a sui generis category mediating between the two (Chapter 4)—lead inexorably to the conclusion (Chapter 5) that Iranian men adopted "western nationalist or racist ideas," perhaps because western nationalism is a "patriarchal construct" and because "Iranian history and politics have been such a masculine affair" (132). Iranian women, on the other hand, are more sensitive to the country's ethnic diversity and never use the terms "Aryan" or "Semite." While the concluding chapter allows somewhat for differences in the individual

attitudes and assumptions of the writers considered, the structure of the book shunts the argument into equating anti-Islamic sentiment and anti-Arab chauvinism with patriarchal values and western notions of racial purity, whereas acceptance or celebration of Arabs and a multi-ethnic Iran becomes the purview of feminist and/or Islamic values.

This argument I find problematic for a number of reasons. First, the modern definition of Iran in terms of a linguistic, ethnic, racial and territorial entity distinct from its foreign, and specifically Arab, neighbors appears in a fully articulated form in the Shu^ubiyya movement of the 10th and 11th centuries, and indeed much earlier. The Avesta speaks of the *Airyānem Vaejā*, the homeland of the Aryan Iranians, and in the *Shāhnāmeḥ* of Ferdowsi, the sharp distinction between Iran and non-Iran (*an-irān*)—rivals and invaders variously associated with mythic, Greek, Turkic, and then eventually Arab and Muslim peoples—gives the story its primary contours. Ferdowsi's sense of tragedy over the conquest of Sasanid Iran stems not so much from the religion of the conquerors (Ferdowsi was, after all, Muslim), but because of the nomadic and uncivilized nature of the victorious Arab tribesmen who brought the saga of the *Iranian* nation to an end. Ferdowsi curses Fate for allowing a superior and glorious civilization, which had withstood the attacks of its enemies since mythopoeic time immemorial, to succumb to barbarian invaders, whom he characterizes as lizard-eaters and camel milk-drinkers with overweening ambitions on the realm of the Persians (*‘ajam*, itself an Arabic word for the linguistic Other, which however came to inform Iranian self-definition as referring specifically to Persians and Sasanian Iran).

The anti-Arabism of Naderpour and Akhavan-e Sales, the two male poets considered by Saad, is very much in this vein of Ferdowsi; indeed Akhavan-e Sales appeals openly to Ferdowsi in the title of his collection, *The End of the Shāhnāmeḥ*, and Naderpour evokes the worship of light and fire in the pre-Islamic religious traditions of Iran, in opposition to the darkness of Islam. Here the target of opprobrium is not so much the Arab as an ethnic or racial identity, but the religion of Islam and the spirit of thinking attributed to it. Indeed, as Saad points out, Nâderpour even condemns as dirty and bleak an entire Iranian city, Qom, because of its status as the center of Islamic learning. It is true that these writers, and many others, view "the Arabs" as oppressors of the Iranian nation and perverters of its noble religious traditions and customs, and that Akhavan-e Sales feels nothing but contempt for the influence of Semitic culture on Iran (while, of course, ignoring the important influence of Babylonians and Assyrians on the creation of Achaemenid civilization). But the Arab for these poets is not a contemporary living being, he is merely a symbol in the nationalism of nostalgia, formulated already a thousand years earlier in the *Shāhnāmeḥ*.

Though the epic nationalism of the *Shāhnāmeḥ* and its code of chivalry may indeed arise from or mirror patriarchal values, we need not look to the west and 19th-century theories of race to find its roots. Hedayat, however, while promoting an Indo-Iranian and hence Aryan sense of unity and superiority, repeatedly depicts Arabs as physically repulsive, filthy and untrustworthy barbarians. In this case we can be persuaded that European notions of racial superiority have permeated his concepts of Iranian and Other (it may be recalled

that Zoroastrians were regarded as among the purest of Aryans at one point by the Nazis). Hedayat's hatred of Arabness does not confine itself to the politico-religious force of history that slew Sasanian civilization; one feels a palpable shiver of revulsion when the narrators in various Hedayat stories describe Arabs, identified as such with no regard to regional or class variants among Arabs. Al-e Ahmad, while expressing admiration for the classical Arabic of the Koran and prayer and regarding the culture of Shi'i Islam as essentially Iranian, nevertheless finds the contemporary Arabs he meets in Iraq or Saudi Arabia dirty, backward, and unpleasant.

Turning now to the women writers considered by Saad, I think we may more plausibly attribute the neutral or comparatively positive image of Arabs in the works of Daneshvar and Saffarzadeh to their personal politics and attitudes toward Islam than to their gender. Both of these writers flourished in the post-Mosaddegh period, when the threat to Iranian independence and nationalism had shifted to the Western Other. The concerns of the 1920s through the 1940s—modernization, secularization, and constitutionalism—tended to go hand-in-hand with the desire to separate the Iranian nation mentally from pre-modern clericalism and politically from the realm of Islam. In the postwar generation, with British Intelligence and the CIA's sponsorship of a coup against a populist Iranian leader, the increasing political influence of the U.S. in Iran, and the growing cultural onslaught of the west (as first expounded by Al-e Ahmad, Daneshvar's husband), the West, and not the Arabs or Islam, came to be seen as the principle source of oppression holding back the Iranian nation from the achievement of political autonomy and the creation of a modern cultural autochthony. Saffarzadeh thus identifies with Islam as an indigenous, multi-ethnic and regional form of spirituality and authenticity standing in contradistinction to western Christendom with its imperial and colonial designs. But Saffarzadeh is once again dealing, like Naderpour and Akhavan-e Sales, with the Arab as abstract symbol, not as individual. As Saad notes, Saffarzadeh identifies with them, "not as Arabs, but as another oppressed people, like the people of Ireland or Iran, or . . . as fellow Muslims. . ." (72).

As for Forugh Farrokhzad, she is not immediately concerned with the discovery of Iranian national identity, but with personal identity and artistic integrity; the Other for her is not so much a foreigner as false consciousness, social constraint and hypocrisy. As such, though she does satirize Pahlavi nationalism as ersatz, bourgeois, and pompously self-congratulatory in the poem, "O Bejewelled Realm," since she never appeals to the Arab Other she is not a particularly probative example for Saad's discussion. If a counter example of a male writer who sympathetically portrays an Arab in a central role is wanted to disprove the gender-difference thesis, consider Bahram Bayza'i's film *Bāshū, the Little Stranger*, in which a dark-skinned Arab from Iranian Khuzestan orphaned by Iraqi aerial bombardment flees his home only to wind up in rural Mazandaran struggling to gain acceptance among light-skinned villagers who speak no Arabic and little standard Persian. Eventually they find they can communicate through the unifying medium of Persian, the official language of the land, learned in state-run schools by Arabs in the south as well as villagers in the north of Iran. In this medium of schoolbook Persian, a plea for ethnic and linguistic unity is made.

If contemporary Arabs, and not just the historical idea of Arab as the barbarian and Muslim conquerors of Iran, are portrayed by Hedayat and Al-e Ahmad with disgust as dirty, violent, and uncouth, so too are Iranian Jews stereotypically viewed as backward and dirty, as Saad notes (though she does not refer to two studies which might have provided useful comparative material—Jaleh Pirnazar's article on the image of the Iranian Jew in the works of three modern Persian writers [*Iran Nameh* 13, no. 4 (Fall 1995)] and Shirindokht Daghighian's, "A Comparative Study of Anti-Semitism in Europe and Iran," in *Terua* 1). Before attributing this physical aversion for Jews and Arabs to a specifically anti-Semitic racism (in a broader racial/linguistic sense of Semitic, including Arabs and Jews), an analysis of how various threads of personal and communal identity—national, ethnic, linguistic, religious, class, etc.—weave together to create the tapestry of modern Iranian identity is in order. For example, how do Iranian Assyrians, as non-Muslim Semites, or Iranian Armenians, as an ethnically distinct non-Muslim community, figure in Iranian national consciousness? To what extent might religious affiliation make Jews, Zoroastrians, or Baha'is appear as "Others" in the discourse of Iranian nationalism? For an interesting inversion of the problem, we might look to the Biblical Book of Esther, in both its Hebrew and Greek versions, where a Jewish woman inducted into the royal harem at the court of Xerxes (Ahasuerus) struggles to retain her sense of ethnic identity and religious purity.

An investigation into how the Arab Other figures in the construction of Iranian identity ought to consider, then, to what extent Iranian identity is composed of subaltern others. Can we postulate a shared pan-Iranian identity among diverse linguistic and national communities, such as Persians, Gilakis, Lors, Tajiks, Afghans, and Kurds? Conversely, can Afghan, Tajik, or Azerbaijani nationalism (as manifested, for example, in claiming Jalal al-Din Balkhi [Rumi] or Sana'i as Afghan poets, Rudaki as a Tajik poet, or Nezami as an Azerbaijani poet), tell us anything about the relative significance of national versus ethnic versus linguistic identity in Iranian self-conception?

Furthermore, to what extent might postulating a wider Iranian xenophobia help to contextualize the image of Arabs we encounter in Iranian fiction? Discussion of common stereotypes as reflected in colloquial expressions or ethnic jokes about stupid Arabs (i.e., the colloquial phrase "az bikh 'Arab-e," literally, "he's an Arab to his roots," applied to someone who just doesn't "get it"), stubborn Turks, ritually impure Zoroastrians and Jews, unclean Indians, unhygienic Americans ("Amrikā'i-ye kūn nā-shūr"), and Iranian country bumpkins (*dehāti-hā*) would also help illumine what is specific about the Iranian image of and attitude toward Arabs. Reference to Minou Southgate's article (*Iranian Studies* 17 [1984]:3–36) on the classical poet Sa'di's prejudicial depiction of an African black seems conspicuously absent from Saad's bibliography. Two studies of the image of the Arab in Israeli fiction might also have provided useful comparands for Saad's discussion or suggested alternative criteria by which to organize the argument; Gila Ramras-Rauch in *The Arab in Israeli Literature* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1989) groups the writers considered by generation and by the common historical and political conditions which shaped their experience, whereas Risa Domb, *The Arab in Hebrew Prose, 1911–1948* (London; Totowa, N.J.: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1982), evaluates the depiction of Arabs in Israeli fiction in terms of the Arab as

individual, the structure of Arab society, the religion and customs of the Arabs, and the relations between Jews and Arabs.

Though the central argument of this book appears to me flawed, by juxtaposing various attitudes towards Arabs and Islam in modern Persian literature, Saad has raised many interesting questions for the intellectual and cultural history of modern Iran, which it is hoped will be further examined in future scholarship.

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