Short Communication

Different approach in Modern’s Persian Literature around Arab’s History

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Iranianness has an important theme in modern Persian literature from its very beginnings. As part of the answer to the question of self-definition, some Persian Iranian writers, like Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, Sadeq Chubak, Mehdi Akhavan Sales, and Nader Naderpour, have used images of Arabs to define Iran as a nation and themselves as Iranian in contrast to an Arab Other. The Arab Other is a reverse definition of the Iranian Self, for some in terms of race or language, for others in terms of religion, history and culture as well. Moreover, the Arab Other is a metaphor which may also represent the Islamic, or Western Other, or certain aspects of Iranian life which the writer would not be able to criticize openly, for example, the monarchy. However, defining Iranianness is not only a literary concern, but is essential to the creation of an “Iranian” national identity in the 20th century. Indeed, the development of Iranian nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries, in literary and political discourse, may be seen as the “ideological creation of the nation”.

Keywords: Arab, Iranianness, Nationality, Modern Iranian Literature.

Introduction

According to Anderson, one cannot “define” a nation by a set of external and abstract criteria, or objective social facts. (Rian, 1999) Instead the nation is “an imagined political community,” something which is “thought out,” “created.” Thus, literary works are both a reflection of and, more importantly, a part of an ideological discourse, part of the creation of modern Iranian nationalism and Iran as a modern nation. Iranian nationalist discourse set for itself the task of defining Iran as a nation and formulating an Iranian nationalism. One way to define the Iranian Self is by defining the Other -- Western, Islamic, Arab -- in terms of language, race, history, culture, religion or ideology. (Meisami, 1997) Thus, Shahrokh Meskoob sets the Iranian Self against the Arab Other, defining Iranianness in terms of Persian language and pre-Islamic history. Manoochehr Dorraj, sees Shi’i Islam, as an essential part of Iranianness, and sets the Iranian Self against the Western (non-Islamic) Other. (Hovanisian, 1997) The terms of these definitions, however, are set by two very different understandings of nationalism. Leon Pollakov describes the Western paradigm of nationalism, based on myths of a common origin, the linguistic evidence of which became proof of race, and of a Golden Age, to which the nation might return by returning to its original cultural, linguistic and racial purity. (Rypka et al., 1990

Indeed, Western nationalist and racist ideas, particularly the existence of an “Aryan” and “Semitic” race, developed hand-in-hand. Indeed, the central motif of racism is “purity,” the same purity which informs the Western national model and so precludes a multi-ethnic nationalism. Meskoob defines Iranianness in terms of this Western nationalist discourse. It is the same understanding of nationalism which was largely propaganda by the Pahlavi government. However, Dorraj defines Iranianness in terms of the “alternative Islamic ideology” which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in Iran. In what one might call an Islamist rather than a nationalist view, the other is seen in ideological terms, and it is this view which is reflected in the Islamic Republic. (Ashtiani, 2000) The same definitions of Iranianness, in terms of the Iranian Self and the Arab or Western Other, and the same formulations of Iranian nationalism appear in literary discourse.
Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh objects to arabness

In Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh’s “Persian is [as Sweet as] Sugar,” Persian and Iranian are synonymous, as are Arab (or French or Azarbaijani) and foreign. While Jamalzadeh regards Islam as integral to an Iranian national identity, he objects to a backward Islam and to Arabness as foreign. Jamalzadeh associates an Arab Other with religious superstition and backwardness, and defines the Iranian Self as Persian and Muslim. Yet, while Jamalzadeh uses the Western national model, seeing Iranian nationalism in terms of a common language and identity, he does not support Western racism.

Sadeq Hedayat loathes the Arab Other

Sadeq Hedayat loathes the Arab Other, and abhors Islam as an Arab religion. In "Seeking Absolution" and Parvin the Sasanid Girl, he portrays Arabs as dark-skinned, dirty, diseased, ugly, stupid, cruel and shameless, bestial and demonic. Moreover, Hedayat portrays present-day Iranian Muslims as corrupt and hypocritical. Only his Sasanid Iranians are attractive, courageous, intelligent, cultured and virtuous. Hedayat idealizes the pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian past as the Golden Age of Iran. In his view, Iran's true cultural identity, shared with "Aryan" India, was destroyed by the Arab Muslim invaders, who replaced Iran's superior civilization with the brutal and bloodthirsty culture and religion of their own. Hedayat, often admired as a writer of sensitivity and progressive human values, espouses Western racism and anti-Semitism. He believes that "Aryan" Iranians are racially superior to the "Semitic" Arabs.

Sadeq Chubak portrays Arabs as hypocritical, ugly and cruel

Sadeq Chubak’s view differs only somewhat from that of Hedayat. In The Patient Stone, Iranian rootlessness and alienation are the result of history: the Arab Muslims destroyed a great Iranian civilization and could not replace it. Iranians, both individually and socially, have consequently suffered because they were cut off from their own, true Iranian history, art, and culture. (Perry, 1985) Chubak’s characters also reveal racist thinking, and a level of anti-Arab sentiment throughout The Patient Stone. Chubak portrays the Arab (and Indian) Other as hypocritical, ugly and cruel, while the Iranian Self has been defeated and further corrupted by Semitic hypocrisy in the form of Islam, for Chubak sees the institution of Shi’i Islam in Iran only as a tool for oppression. At the same time, he rejects Iranian chauvinism. Zoroastrianism and the history of Iranian kings hold no answers either. Indeed, Chubak goes so far as to equate Zoroastrianism with Islam, and to reject both. However, he rejects Islam on two levels: because it is a religion, which in Chubak’s view offers no answers, and because it is an Arab religion. For Chubak, there are no answers; life is indeed without meaning. However, alienation and existential despair are both universal, and historically and culturally specific. Existential despair informs the Self more than categories of Iranianness or Arabness, yet Chubak maintains those categories as well. While Chubak rejects Aryanism, his writings do support anti-Semitism. (Wilson, 1990)

Mehdi Akhavan Sales blames the Muslim Arab invader

Mehdi Akhavan Sales, like Hedayat, blames the Muslim Arab invaders for destroying Iran’s true cultural identity and longs for a return to pre-Islamic Zoroastrian culture and greatness. According to "The Ending of the Shahnameh," the ending of Zoroastrian Iranian cultures with the defeat of the Sasanid Empire and the coming of Islam has resulted in ruin and despair, which can be resolved only by returning to Iran's pre-Islamic golden age. The Iranian Self was pure, bright and beautiful, but has been corrupted by the Arab Other, false, dark, and evil. Akhavan decries "Semitic and Arabic and Islamic" influence on the "heritage of our own Aryan ancestors." In so doing he echoes Hedayat’s view of Iranians and Arabs as two different and unequal races, one Aryan and superior, the other Semitic and inferior.

Nader Naderpour rejects Arabs and Islam as alien

Nader Naderpour rejects Arabs and Islam as alien, and fundamentally opposed to the true Iranian culture and values. "Here and There" repeats the same image of Arabs as found in Hedayat and Akhavan, as savage, alien intruders who have destroyed a superior Iranian civilization. Nader Naderpour portrays the Arab Other as dark, savage and inhuman, in images of the irrational, blood and the moon; he portrays the Iranian Self as the creator of an enlightened civilization in images of Zoroastrian fire, the sun and spring time. Naderpour sees Islam not so much as wrong in itself, but wrong because it is Arab, and therefore backward and cruel. In "Here and There," Naderpour compares the establishment of the Islamic Republic to the Arab Muslim conquest of the Sasanid Empire, and suggests that it is in fact a continuation of that same defeat of superior Iranian culture at the hands of the ignorant and intolerant Arabs. In Naderpour’s view, to be a devout Muslim, or a supporter of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is to be Arab and therefore not Iranian, indeed therefore almost less than human. Like Hedayat, Chubak and Akhavan, his is
an anti-Islamic and anti-Arab view.

**Forough Farrokhzade has no need to establish her Iranianness**

Forough Farrokhzad was not concerned in her poetry with the question of Arabs and Iranians. On some level at least these are issues of masculine history and politics, from which, as a woman, had been excluded and at the same time to which she had attached little importance. Unlike the men, she has no need to establish an historical identity as an Iranian, nor does she need to establish her cultural identity as an Iranian at the expense of another. There are no Arabs or Iranians as such in her poems, only individuals. Like Hedayat, Chubak and Naderpour, Farrokhzad did not believe in Islam, and criticized the institution of Islam in “The Windup Doll” and “I Feel Sorry for the Garden,” but, unlike Hedayat or Chubak, she criticizes it as an Iranian, not as an alien or Arab institution. In “I Feel Sorry for the Garden,” she is equally critical of religion, the mother’s fault, and nationalism, the father’s fault. At the same time, Farrokhzad uses Islamic imagery in a very positive sense, as in “Someone Who Is Not Like Anyone,” albeit from the perspective of a third-grade girl in South Tehran. Unlike the previous writers, she refuses to participate in the nationalist discourse. Perhaps that is why Farrokhzad’s anti-Islamic sentiments are not anti-Arab.

**For Tahereh Saffarzadeh, Islam is universal, not Arab**

For Tahereh Saffarzadeh, as a practicing Muslim, Islam is a universal, not an Arab phenomenon. She writes as Muslim first, and as an Iranian second. Her world view is not nationalist, but Islamic and universalist. Her Iranianness, in terms of geography, language, culture and history, provide the specific context within which she practices her Islam. Moreover, in poems about Iran, “The Stooping Ones” and “The Love Journey,” Saffarzadeh’s vision of Iranianness includes Persian Iranian elements, other Iranian elements, and Islamic elements. In acknowledging a multi-ethnic Iran, Saffarzadeh’s Persian Iranianness is but one of many varieties. Saffarzadeh portrays no Arab Other. Arab characters appear in her poems, not as Arabs but as another oppressed people, in “Through the Passageway of Silence Torture,” or as brothers in Islam, in "Homesickness." Most significant, however, is Saffarzadeh’s view of history, which essentially differs from that of Hedayat, Chubak, Akhavan or Naderpour. “Salman’s Journey” portrays the Arab Muslim invaders of Sasanid Iran not as Arabs conquering Iran, but as Muslims bringing in the liberating truth of Islam to a people waiting to accept it. Saffarzadeh portrays Salman as the exemplar of all Persian Muslims, just as Balal represents the Africans and Shuaib the Europeans, all Companions of the Arab Prophet Mohammad. (Bahreini, 2005. P.11) Their nationality is important only insofar as it underlines the internationalist character of Islam. Instead of a national or racial confrontation between Iranians and Arabs, Saffarzadeh sees and ideological confrontation with Western imperialism and materialism, with anti-Islamic ideology. Hers is an Islamic political model, instead of the Western, and so very different, in the absence of Western nationalist and racist ideas, from that of the men previously discussed.

**Simin Daneshvar: Arab and Islamic elements have Iranian character**

Simin Daneshvar’s treatment of Arabs is part of her very different definition of Iranianness. Daneshvar allows for much difference among Iranians, but sees an essential unity at the level of myth and religion, where pre-Islamic Iranian mythology joins with Islam to produce a cultural synthesis which is essentially Iranian. (Cook, 1993) While Jamalzadeh -- alone among the male authors treated above -- accepts Islam, he still sets an Iranian Self against an Arab Other. For Daneshvar, however, Arab and Islamic elements in Iranian culture have an Iranian, rather than a foreign character. In Savushun she very nicely turns around Jamalzadeh’s “Persian is [as Sweet as] Sugar,” when what appears to be a villainous Arab turns out to be an unscrupulous Persian clergyman, and again in “Traitor’s Intrigue,” where the character of the Aqa is both specifically Iranian and more generally, as a Muslim, universalist, and where Arabic is not a foreign language to Muslim Iranians. Like Saffarzadeh, Daneshvar also accepts ethnic diversity, unlike the male writers previously discussed. For Daneshvar, there are Persians, Turkish, and Arab Iranians, but there is no Arab Other. In Savushun, Daneshvar recognizes Arabs simply as Arabs. For Daneshvar, like Saffarzadeh, in “Traitor’s Intrigue” and Savushun the Other is Western imperialism, manifested in Iran as the Pahlavi regime. Daneshvar’s view is very different from the Western nationalist and essentially racist view of men.

**CONCLUSION**

Unlike Jamalzadeh, Hedayat, Chubak, Akhavan Sales, Naderpour, and [Jalal] Al-e Ahmad, the women do not reflect Western nationalist or racist ideas. They never use the terms “Aryan” or “Semit." They also accept ethnic diversity, while for the men, "Iranian" means “Persian.” (Of course there are many male writers who do accept Iranian ethnic diversity, such as Samad Behrangi, Reza Barahani, or Gholamhossein Sa’edi.) Curiously, nationalism seems very much a masculine concern, perhaps because Iranian history and politics have been a
masculine affair. Yet, to pose the question in those terms suggests that Western nationalism is indeed a patriarchal construct. Hedayat’s accusations of sexual violation, Chubak’s images of miscegenation, and Al-e Ahmad’s attention to the sexuality of Arabs and beauty (or lack thereof) of Arab women, and his defining Arab men as Arabs (whose province is nationality), but Arab women as women (whose province is sex), are all in line with that central motif of Western nationalism, “purity.” Racial purity is encoded in sexual purity, which is possessed by women and enforced by men, and “miscegenation” is a violation of both. All of the men put Iranian nationalism in terms of the Western nationalist paradigm, with its myth of common origin and subsequent insistence on linguistic homogeneity, from which follows an insistence on racial homogeneity, and all but Jamalzadeh, a cleric’s son, espouse Western anti-Semitism as well. All of them set the Iranian Self against the Arab Other, and for all but Jamalzadeh again, the Arab Other is also the Islamic Other. The women’s writings, however, reflect a very different approach.

REFERENCES