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Nasrin Rahimieh, *Iranian Culture: Representation and Identity*, Routledge, 2016, 155 pp., \$145.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781138913783.

If you ask an Iranian in diaspora about Iranian culture, you are likely to invite one of two standard responses: disdain or nostalgia. However, the nostalgia for the culture of a glorious, albeit lost, monarchical past and disdain for the heavily restricted and much more rigid definition of culture offered by the current Islamic state are opposite sides of the same coin. Many in the Iranian diasporic community idealize the past as the seat of authentic Iranian culture and identity and therefore criticize present-day Iranian culture for being somehow less- or in-authentic. Above all, the nostalgic image of Iranian culture upheld by many in the diasporic community is fixed and unified. By extension, according to this view, Iranian identity itself is defined by the past and must remain singular and unchanged. At the same time, many Iranians at home also uphold a monolithic definition of Iranianness that is equally exclusionary. These conflicting views of what constitutes an “authentic” Iranianness reject the heterogeneity of Iranian identity. From such myopic vantages, many Iranians are made into subalterns who cannot speak to the realities of the inherent complexities and intricacies of Iranian culture and identity. In hope of addressing this complex set of problems, echoing Svetlana Boym’s notion of *restorative nostalgia*,¹ in *Iranian Culture: Representation and Identity*, Nasrin Rahimieh embarks on an exploration of, “The experience of loss [which] naturally fueled a desire in [the diasporic community] to restore and maintain” and reconstruct “an idealized past” while also examining the misrecognitions and misunderstandings between Iranians at home and those in the diaspora (2).

While her book is by no means the first treatment of Iranian culture and identity—on the contrary it partakes in and reorients a rich tradition of rigorous scholarship on these subjects—Rahimieh is the first scholar to incorporate cultural productions, “high and low” as the author puts it, in her study. According to her, utilizing an inclusive range of sources, thereby “making room for the less lofty expressions of Iranianness,” just “might alleviate some of [Iranians’] collective anxiety about representing [themselves] judiciously and well” (14). Drawing on a broad collection of sources, ranging from works of literature, a popular song, posters, and a comic film, to her own passionate personal oral accounts, Rahimieh provides an inviting discussion and ingenious analysis of “the incompatibilities and the fissures” within Iranian culture and identity. Thus, Rahimieh’s study is particularly welcome.

¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

The book is the result of her personal encounters with various representations of Iranian identity while she was the director of the Samuel Jordan Center for Persian Studies and Culture at the University of California, Irvine. Fully mindful of the reductive and totalizing logic of the definitions of Iranian culture given both at home and in the diaspora, Rahimieh investigates the contested claims that “shaped [Iranians’] understanding of culture and...the spaces they created for new articulations of it” (1). Seeking “the stranger within,” Rahimieh opts out of a “desire for purity in favor of complexity” in her attempt at a definition of Iranian identity (11).

The book incorporates copious contemporaneous scholarly sources by such renowned thinkers as Dariush Ashuri, Sadeq Kia, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, to name but a few, in order to trace the origins of the various definitions offered for the word *farhang* (culture). Doing so, Rahimieh is in search of the disavowed elements of Iranian culture. Exploring the works of Daryush Shayegan, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, and Hamid Dabashi, she then delineates Iranians’ historical tendency to “[m]easur[e] the self in relation to the West [which] has resulted in a sense of inadequacy” (12). Rahimieh’s methodology also incorporates the growing scholarship on cultural identity generally speaking such as Stuart Hall’s suggestions that identities are never unified, stable, or fixed,² and Etienne Balibar’s “political community” and “other scene.”³ Thus, Rahimieh approaches “Iranian identity as fundamentally ambiguous and not always a conscious and transparent self-portrayal” (11). By bringing together this diverse body of literature the author challenges the idealizations of Iranian culture and its repressed manifestations, as well as the narrow definitions and conceptualizations of Iranian culture and representations of Iranian identity upheld by both the Iranian diasporic community and Iranians living in Iran.

Iranian Culture consists of an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The organization of the material in the book highlights not only the separate definitions upheld by members of the Iranian diasporic community and Iranians at home, but also maintains a clear continuity between them. The cumulative effect of juxtaposing these perspectives is the creation of a site for the de- and re-construction of a complex Iranian identity.

In the first chapter, “Back to the future: time travel and Iranian identity,” Rahimieh reads Iraj Pezshkzad’s *Mashallah Khan at the Court of Harun al-Rashid (Mashallah Khan dar bargah-e Harun al-Rashid)* against the historical background of Iran during the 1960s and 1970s to illustrate the imaginative explorations of Mashallah Khan and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in their disavowal of cultural history in order to overturn reality and create a new imaginary one. In this chapter, Mashallah Khan, who time travels, and Mohammad Reza Shah, who suffers from fears of inadequacy because of measuring Iran in relation to the West, try to perform an idealized Iranianness (*Iraniiyyat*) through glorification of a lost pre-Islamic past.

Chapter 2, “Shooting the past, staging the revolution,” focuses on a popular song called “Q. Q. Bang Bang,” released in the US in 2003 by pre-revolutionary Iran’s most prominent female singer, Googoosh. The song represents an important Iranian cultural scene around the time of the 1979 revolution, and explores the underlying experimental desire of the revolutionary generation. Rahimieh deliberates on how the Iranian diasporic community dismisses this revolutionary desire as political naïveté and avoids any discussion of it.

² Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, eds. Jane Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (London: Blackwell, 2006), 233-246. See also Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity?’” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 1-17.

³ Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (London: Verso, 2002).

Rahimieh ends this chapter with a realization that the past and the present cannot be reconciled in the imaginary space of the song, and a different space is needed. The following chapter, “Stage managing the return of the repressed,” delves into the encounter between Los Angeles and Iran, the existing confusions and disapprovals of one another as the “authentic” Iranian, in Saman Moghadam’s comic film, *Maxx* (2005). Rahimieh suggests that the chasm between Iranians in diaspora and Iranians at home has created a space where mutual vilifications are rendered entertaining in *Maxx*. The chapter examines “both the desire for and the impossibility of self-recognition in the other” (66).

In Chapter 4, “From the displaced to the misplaced,” the reader is introduced to a fictional character, Simon Ordoubadi, in Houman Mortazavi’s *Project Misplaced*. Studying Ordoubadi’s candidacy posters, which are “cluttered with traces of an imagined Iran of the past and the present and an imaginary construct of Irangeles symbolic of California,” (93) Rahimieh exhibits “the ineffectiveness of the strategic developments of Iranian identity that loudly proclaims the uniqueness of Iranian identity” (101). Reading Mortazavi’s work against Ramin Bajoghli’s *Tehran Avenue*, she portrays how Iranians in diaspora suffer from a loss of Iranian identity both at the personal and communal level. She concludes her argument in this chapter by demonstrating how as a result of the hostage crisis diasporic Iranians enacted various forms of disguising, thereby multiplying Iranian identities, in order to avoid hostility.

“The hen’s husband, or deterritorializations of Persian,” Chapter 5, considers the Persian language as a site of construction and deconstruction of Iranian identity, especially through a close reading of Taghi Modarressi’s novel *The Virgin of Solitude* (which has been translated by Rahimieh herself). In this chapter, Rahimieh discusses her struggles as a translator to maintain a balance between “foreignizing and domestication” of the Persian language, and the ways that she had to step outside the boundaries of the manuscript to be able to “grasp the many accents, registers, and layers in [Modarressi’s] life and work” (114-115). Rahimieh discusses how the loss of language for those in diaspora is an inevitable outcome of isolation from the native context and how the Persian language, which is expected to be the means for preservation of Iranian culture and identity, can be used as a tool for exclusion. In the sixth chapter, “Illuminating internal alterities,” Rahimieh turns to the Armenian-Iranian novelist, Zoya Pirzad’s works *Things we Left Unsaid* (*Cheragha ra man khamush mikonam*) and *The Space Between Us* (*Yek ruz mandeh beh eid pak*) in order to explore the incompatibilities at the core of modern Iranian cultural history and national literature. “The insistence on impenetrable boundaries between what is imagined as the ‘true’ Iranian and others,” she writes, “is inseparable from the desire for a pure essence of Iranianness” (127). Turning to Iran’s Armenian others among its other ethnic minorities, Rahimieh posits that Pirzad’s works reveal the underlying anxieties of the nation to be represented as cosmopolitan and the hypocrisy of the national propaganda for being portrayed as diverse. Finally, in her conclusion, referring to Mostafa Eslamieh’s reworking of *Metamorphosis* which draws at once on Kafka and the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*, Rahimieh suggests that there might be a different way of talking about Iranian culture and identity by rejecting the idea of uniformity and welcoming its inherent multiplicity.

In each chapter, Rahimieh interweaves her personal encounters with the topic by recounting her own struggles with the Iranian diasporic community as the director of an Iranian Studies center, as well as her mother’s loss of Persian language and her efforts to preserve the purity of the language. In this way, the book offers an intimate look behind the public representations of Iranian identity to reveal the underpinnings that construct Iranianness. Over the course of the book, Rahimieh also sheds light on the constant need

for a unified cultural sense of belonging that is projected in various sites including the cultural productions she engages.

In sum, the book is a major addition to the existing studies in Iranian culture and identity and broadens our understanding of the complexities inherent in Iranian culture and the ways Iranians are constantly performing their identities. While the book will be of significant interest to scholars of Iranian and Middle Eastern studies, it will also be of interest to specialists of diaspora studies, cultural studies, film studies, and literary criticism. Rahimieh's graceful writing style and incorporation of various cultural productions will help make the topic available to a wide readership.

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