

Persophilia: Persian Culture on the Global Scene

Hamid Dabashi

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Academic investigation of the mutual influences of the West and the East has been the subject of few studies during the past decades. In this category, Hamid Dabashi's work on the mutual effects of the Persianate Orient and the West is impressive. The book traces evidences of the West's Persophilia throughout world history from Biblical and ancient texts to contemporary texts under the influence of the Romanticism, Transcendentalism, mysticism, fascism, and pan-Islamism approaches. It provides thoughtful commentary on the roots of western Persophilia, its outcome for the West and the Persianate world, and the overall picture of Persophilic knowledge production and transfer.

As such, Dabashi's work contributes to the socio-historical hermeneutics of Persian and western culture by mapping their inter-related texts. He considers Persophilia a sub-category of Orientalism, through which he challenges colonial-based Orientalism. By relying on Jürgen Habermas' theory of bourgeois public space, Dabashi criticizes Raymond Schwab and Edward Said's views as introducing a one-directional influence of the West upon the East. His work suggests that there is a cyclic relation of influences between them. To further this point, Dabashi expands Habermas' public space theory beyond "bourgeois" and shifts it from a limited national level into a transnational scene that emphasizes the role of Persophilia in the circulation and production of knowledge worldwide. The book deems the emergence of Persophilia during the eighteenth century and its continuation to the present time as an influential

factor in forming a public space in which contradictory discourses of resistance and support develop in both the West and the Persianate world. The author believes that such contradictory discourses, which have resulted in reformulating new western and Iranian identities, shape the main theme of his work.

The book contains an introduction, twelve chapters, a conclusion, and an appendix. The introduction lays down a good rationalization for the overall goal and the theoretical foundation of the work for establishing that Persophilia has been neglected in studies of Orientalism and that such neglect has impacted world history. The author's introduction of Habermas' "public sphere" would have been apropos in the introduction, rather than appearing late in chapter seven.

Chapter 1 focuses on the Europeans' discovery of ancient Persia as an origin of western Persophilia and provides evidence supporting the great impact that Cyrus (d. 531 BC), through Xenophon's (d. 354 BC) *Cyropedia*, has had on many scholars, specifically on the authors of America's constitution; an influence that he believed was provided via the formation of transnational spheres through which the discourse on Cyrus circulated throughout the world. Two other Persophilic awareness-instigating texts mentioned by the author are the Bible and the Cyrus cylinder.

In chapter 2, the author discusses Montesquieu's (d. 1755) *Persian Letters* as another proof of western Persophilia, mapping it to Akhondzadeh's *Maktū-bāt* and claiming that the two works influenced eighteenth-century Europe and nineteenth-century Iran and Central Asia, respectively, in a way that ultimately led to the rise of Iranian nationalism. He differs with Said and Schwab in that he concludes that Persophilia has been more of a liberating force than a colonial dominating effort for both the West and the East.

Chapter 3 focuses on the introduction of Persian as an Indo-European language by Sir William Jones (d. 1794) and its later incorporation into the European public sphere. The emphasis is on the crucial role of Jones' finding on the rise of European Persophilia that, in turn, influenced many social and intellectual movements, among them the French and Russian revolutions, Romanticism, and the Persian linguistic nationalism associated with European and Iranian self-redefinition.

In chapter 4, Dabashi distinguishes the Persophilic attractions of Goethe (d. 1832) to Hafez (d. 1389/90) and Sa'di (d. 1291 or 1292) and Hegel (d. 1831) to Persian history from the ones rooted in European colonial interests. He holds that this pure Persophilia resulted in the formation of a universal literary humanism that affected European public spheres and the course of history around the world, together with an active nationalization

of Persian literature. In this chapter, his attempt to link German fascism to Persian mysticism and its later romanticization is a new approach that, however hard he tries to justify in the next chapters, does not seem to have sufficient support.

Chapter 5 finds the roots of pan-Islamism in the transfer of an amalgam of mystic-romantic western Persophilia, American Transcendentalism, and fascism in a cycle of cross-references and connections among Hafez, Goethe, Iqbal, Wagner, Nietzsche, Emerson, Tagore, Thoreau, and Martin Luther King, Jr. throughout Europe, South Asia, the United States, and Iran. He uses these exchanges as a proof against the idea of opposition between East and West. Dabashi concludes that the Orient began to see itself in a different light through Persophilia, a light that was shed by the Occident. I find this ironic and believe that this may, in turn, point to a covert West-centeredness at the heart of the book.

In chapter 6, the author seeks the Persophilic roots of Friedrich Nietzsche's (d. 1900) philosophy in the three figures of Zarathustra, Hafez, and Dionysus. The author claims that Nietzsche's philosophy reintroduced Iran to European philosophy. In turn, the influence of his philosophy in Iran became the underlying framework of resistance against government tyranny and terror. This can be found, for example, in Ahmad Shamlou's (d. 2000) poetry.

Chapter 7 centers around Edward FitzGerald's magnificent 1859 English translation, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, that, in turn, instigated a new interest throughout the world and also among such Iranian literati as Sadeq Hedayat, who was influenced by Khayyam's and Nietzsche's nihilism and Kafka's fright. Dabashi considers the changing fate of Persian poetry to be in perfect harmony with the changing economic and moral atmosphere of Europe and counts European social and intellectual movements as liberating Persian poetry and prose; an interpretation that falsifies his West-decentralizing claim. A belated definition and criticism of Habermas' "public sphere" appears in this chapter, which should have appeared in the introduction.

Chapter 8 discusses the impact of the Europeans' discovery of Ferdowsi's (d. 1020) *Shahnameh* on the West and on the emergence of Iranian epic nationalism. Dabashi associates Matthew Arnold's (d. 1888) fascination with Rostam and Sohrab to his commitment to Christian renunciation. Accordingly, he views Montesquieu, Goethe, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Arnold as strong figures in Persophilia and, as such, as instigating resistance against European imperialism and "the engine of postcolonial history."

In chapter 9, the reader is introduced to the importance of proxy public spheres (i.e., countries adjacent to Iran) and para-public transnational spheres

(i.e., underground knowledge production sites). Dabashi claims that it was through these mediums that such Persian translations as James Morier's *Hajji Baba of Ispahan* could be published in 1824 and distributed. They, in turn, nurtured revolutionary ideas and movements in Iran. Dabashi argues that the advantage of western knowledge production sites over their eastern counterparts is that the imperial hegemony of the former facilitated the travel of knowledge throughout the world. Ultimately, he criticizes such terms as "Westernization/modernization" for, in his view, concealing the existence of transnational public spheres.

Chapter 10 provides evidence of Persophilia in the European visual and performing arts through which Persia is portrayed as royal and imperial. Dabashi considers the colonial subjects of artwork and literary works as active agents of their own history, as opposed to the passive objects of others' representations. Chapter 11 seeks to introduce the diffusion of the Iranian literary heritage throughout Europe and North America as a product of the transnational literary spheres created by Europeans, Iranians, Indians, Tajiks, Afghans, and others. His mention of multiple subjects of knowledge production neither undermines his uneven focus on the priority of western Persophilia nor his excessive emphasis on imperialism's hegemony at the expense of other active agents.

Chapter 12 provides evidence of Persophilia in the works of Reynold Nicholson (d. 1945), Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003), and Henry Corbin (d. 1978) as well as their fascination with Rumi's mysticism. He considers Ali Shariati, Dariush Shaygan, Ahmad Fardid, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr as their Iranian counterparts. He associates the rise of pan-Islamism with Persian mysticism combined with German Nazism and fascism through a common attraction to mystical notions of authenticity, collectivity, and tradition. He repeatedly criticizes Nasr throughout the book as the chief champion of Persian mysticism, a philosopher at the service of the Pahlavi monarchy and a nurturer of the Islamic revolution. However, he includes no evidence from the body of his work. He considers Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Shari'ati as merely the path pavers. Dabashi sees a structural similarity between the German author Ernst Jünger/Martin Heidegger's and Al-e Ahmad's approaches to modernity and considers the search for the authentic "German" in postwar Germany as a precise equivalent to the search for "true Islam" in Iran. He contributes such similarities to global capitalism, which has legitimated the concurrent migration of labor and capital against which a globalized revolutionary condition has emerged due to the dialectical character of the created public spaces worldwide.

In the last chapter, Dabashi redefines Persophilia using the new terms of “nomadic ideas travel” and “mode of cultural gift exchange” and considers “Western Civilization” to be a product of circular influences in which capital, labor, and ideas are flowing. He supports this idea by referring to the Japanese philosopher Kojin Karatani’s (b. 1941) interpretation of the structure of the world’s history by substituting “exchange” for “modes of production” seeking a change in the relation of capital/nation-state. He believes that such redefinitions avoid naturalizing the West’s fictive centrality as the main source of knowledge, a discourse that deprives a great part of the world of its agentivity potential, however effective in facilitating the domination of capital over labor and the bourgeois over the proletariat.

Dabashi’s book is a successful attempt to map the origin and development of Persophilia, tracing its outcomes for both the West and the East and resulting in a comprehensive interpretation of Orientalism. His revision of Habermas’ theory dismantles the idea of the East-West contrast by portraying the West as a transitory knowledge-production site that has been related to and is influenced by the Eastern-most parts of an important part of ancient Persian and later Muslim civilizations.

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