

Origins of the Arab-Iranian Conflict will be a key ingredient and conversation partner for those pondering these pathways and the legacies that make the Persian Gulf so fraught for so many.

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The Last Muslim Intellectual: The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad. Hamid Dabashi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 334 pp.

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Hamid Dabashi's *The Last Muslim Intellectual: The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad* constitutes the first sorely needed monograph in English on a figure who perhaps more than any other of his generation epitomizes what it has meant to be a committed intellectual, embodying a critical, frenetic, and searching intelligence grounded in everyday observations, incessant movement, and intuitive flashes of brilliance. Al-e Ahmad "contain[ed] multitudes," to quote Whitman, and Dabashi does an admirable job of bringing them to light.

As is known to anyone with a perfunctory knowledge of Al-e Ahmad, he cuts a controversial figure to this day. On the one hand, his legacy is one that has found itself conscripted by Iran's ruling theocracy to justify its recoil into reactionary cultural particularism, anti-intellectualism, and authoritarian forms of social control. On the other, Al-e Ahmad has been subject to summary judgement and put on trial as *the* intellectual who poisoned the well — Iran's own Pied Piper, more abhorred than even Ayatollah Khomeini, because he bewitched not only the "common folk" but the secular intelligentsia. His alleged lambasting of the verities of Enlightenment rationalism and "European modernity" paved the way, we are told, for medieval clericalism, and engendered among intellectuals an infatuation with a "jargon of authenticity." He was a confused rabble-rouser who jettisoned reason for the politics of identity and wanton irrationalism, a romantic who fed on despair to conjure up an obscurantist and mystifying image of the past. Rather than seeking to understand the fits and starts immanent to his thinking *in situ*, Al-e Ahmad has been faulted for being a false prophet who propagated bad history and half-baked ideas. There is of course some truth to these accusations, especially if one's expectation is that Al-e Ahmad provide a sober, objective and comprehensive account of historical events, instead of a critique of the prevailing ideas of his own age and provocation to thought. The historical baggage of the 1979 revolution and the bloody consolidation of the Islamic Republic have obscured the ability to read him in ways free of a liberal juridical episteme that mandates one to sit in judgement and condemn and relegate him to a better forgotten past or to see him as the progenitor of our ongoing calamity.

Dabashi's book sets out to liberate Al-e Ahmad from these limiting strictures, which elide the myriad ambivalences, the self-questioning, the tentativeness, and the reversals that characterize the form and content of Al-e Ahmad's thinking as he collided with both unknown and familiar worlds. In Dabashi's own words, "what later generations of critics faulted in Al-e Ahmad as contradictory were in fact palpating signs of a robust critical mind in action" (p. 26). Dabashi powerfully argues that interpreters left, liberal, and Islamist have misread Al-e Ahmad, because they almost invariably see his work as a key that makes events that transpired decades after his death intelligible. In contrast to this approach, Dabashi seeks to capture the constant movement and the unrelenting dialectic

in which Al-e Ahmad sought to understand himself and the specific historical and social conditions that characterized Iran and its many diverse peoples in relation to that which was new, evocative, and Other. In *The Last Muslim Intellectual*, Dabashi repeatedly describes the endeavor to familiarize the unfamiliar and defamiliarize the familiar, as if it were the organizing principle of Al-e Ahmad's thinking, or at least as close to one as we are able to discern. Even if one questions whether Al-e Ahmad is best thought of as a Marxist in the decades following his break with the Tudeh Party, we might understand this process of familiarization and defamiliarization as close to critiques of reified consciousness and commodity fetishism as we are likely to find in his oeuvre.

The importance of this book resides in situating Al-e Ahmad among a range of anti-colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edward W. Said, and Enrique Dussel, among others. It has long struck me that Al-e Ahmad is profoundly relevant to the so-called decolonial turn, an issue about which I have published a number of articles myself. Although he provides what might generously be called a Neo-Marxist critique of primitive accumulation, racial capitalism, and vividly described elements of dependency theory, it is perhaps his critique of the basic epistemological, political, and spatial categories of the nation-state that is most relevant today (a critique that Dabashi has himself pursued with alacrity in *Iran without Borders* and other works).¹ This critique not only was a response to the brutal uprooting and deracination of manifold lifeworlds under Reza Shah in the process of modern state formation but also was part of an endeavor to understand Iran's colonial modernity and continued neocolonial predicament, despite the fact that, unlike much of what is known today as the Global South, Iran was never formally colonized (although it was repeatedly occupied or divided into mutual spheres of influence). Colonialism's presence at a remove, even as it harbored decisive repercussions for Iran's capacity for popular self-determination and its wider place in the world, has often effaced the connections between several of Al-e Ahmad's theoretical preoccupations and those of decolonial ethics and critique. Furthermore, the assumption of power by Islamists and their instrumentalization of the *shari'ah* as part and parcel of the exercise of sovereign and disciplinary power and the rapacious exploitation of human and nonhuman nature, despite being a development that Al-e Ahmad could not have possibly anticipated, foregrounds the pertinence of what amounts to a categorial critique of colonial modernity as a social form. In other words, Al-e Ahmad's processual and frenetic thinking is essentially preoccupied with interrogating how the condition of coloniality has insinuated itself into the basic categories and social forms that have come to structure, organize, and discipline Iranians' political and social lives, as well as their knowledge of themselves.

A further notable point in Dabashi's reading of Al-e Ahmad, specifically when he interrogates the unrealized project of the "Four Ka'abahs," is that he was a thinker of self-reflexive doubt and nonidentity. Mecca, Moscow, the United States, and Jerusalem (with Europe somewhere in between)—each proved generative in his global travels, but none ultimately emerged as his *qibla*. His persona of the committed intellectual was always overdetermined by doubt coupled with withering honesty, self-mockery, and the wry smile of the absurd. His dubiousness vis-à-vis utopian schemes ran the gamut from religious doubts, to gendered doubts, to political and social doubts. The search that drove his pursuit of the lineaments of revolutionary subjectivity and the construction of a historical bloc in the face of a brutal police state in *On the Service and the Treachery of the Intellectuals* was in constant tension with a countervailing impulse to interrogate each and every relation of mastery, including those that announced themselves in the name of liberation. Al-e Ahmad was not only an advocate of systemic transformation and a formidable critic of domination and exploitation, but also a naysayer and disruptive force on "the day after."

Finally, perhaps Dabashi's most important corrective resides in his exposition of Simin Daneshvar as Al-e Ahmad's "hidden interlocutor" and an integral part of his dialogical

¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Iran without Borders: Towards a Critique of the Postcolonial Nation* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2016).

self. To flesh this out, Dabashi draws on the couple's extensive, albeit censored, letters and correspondence to great effect. Al-e Ahmad was cognizant of his considerable debt to Daneshvar and readily acknowledged that from 1950 onward he did not publish anything without first having her read and comment on it (with the exception of *On the Service and the Treachery of the Intellectuals*). In an interview some years after her husband's untimely death, Daneshvar told us that if it were not for her Al-e Ahmad would not have become Al-e Ahmad. In this regard, Dabashi's crucial intervention has been a long time coming; up to now it has remained palpably absent from how scholars have approached and read Al-e Ahmad. Yet as Dabashi contends, "we have always (though unbeknownst to ourselves) read them together rather than against each other. . . . Together they did not just become complete but transcended the fictive binaries of gender" (p. 106).

One possible area for further research relates to Al-e Ahmad's time in the Tudeh Party, when he edited *Nameh-ye Mardom*, and specifically how the party, with which nearly every significant intellectual of the period was associated in one way or another, shaped and informed his subsequent trajectory. Although some scholars have touched upon this, more attention has been given to his close relationship with the Socialist League (see, for example, Negin Nabavi's *Intellectuals and the State in Iran*).²

That said, Dabashi's reading of Al-e Ahmad as a dialogical interrogator and thinker who unsettles the line between certitude and doubt, conviction and ambivalence, masculine and feminine, secular and religious, liberation and mastery, and nonidentity and difference allows us to read him anew and with fresh eyes, in ways that continue to illuminate our own crisis-ridden condition.

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Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran. Nazanin Shahrokni (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020). ISBN 9780520304284 (paperback), 176 pp.

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The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) had pivotal effects on the country and its citizens, with women being the first and most affected group among the population. Starting with a decree requiring modesty for women in the public arena, the theocratic state instituted a series of controversial measures controlling male-female interactions in the public domain and segregating spaces where these interactions might occur. Although many of the secular gender policies of the Pahlavi era were abolished as time went by, the exigencies of the political formation of a theocratic state in modern times forced the IRI to adapt its professed ideological gender policies to conflicting pressures and demands from women of different social classes, political persuasions, and world outlooks.

Recipient of the 2020 Latifeh Yarshater Award from the Association of Iranian Studies, *Women in Place* presents sociologist Nazanin Shahrokni's preoccupation with "regimes of gender segregation" in Iran and their conflicting functions. Her research is based on firsthand experiences, fieldwork in the megacity of Tehran, primary sources in Persian, and the latest theoretical developments and research in the fields of women's studies, urban sociology, and

² Negin Nabavi, *Intellectuals and the State in Iran: Politics, Discourse, and the Dilemma of Authenticity* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003).