

REVIEWS

Losing Our Minds, Coming to Our Senses: Sensory Readings of Persian Literature and Culture. M. Mehdi Khorrami and Amir Moosavi, eds. Iranian Studies Series (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2021). Pp. 280. \$72.00 paper. ISBN 9789087283681

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Losing Our Minds, Coming to Our Senses is premised on the idea that the long dominance of sociopolitical approaches in the realm of Persian literary and cultural studies has effectively shuttered other possible ways of interpreting Persian cultural products. It is the aim of the volume's editors, Mehdi Khorrami and Amir Moosavi, to broaden the hermeneutical range of Persian literary and cultural studies to include new "reading model[s]" (28) that will bring forth fresh meanings from Persian texts. *Losing Our Minds, Coming to Our Senses* posits that the field of sensory studies can provide scholars of Persian studies with a generative set of analytical tools with which to move beyond sociopolitical methodologies to the study of literature.

The edited volume contains nine chapters, an introduction, and an editorial preface. In his introduction, Michael Beard provides background information on the field of sensory studies and offers general ruminations on Persian-language sensory expressions. A large part of the introduction hinges on the premise that there is a "characteristically Persian attitude towards the senses that distinguishes it from those of other cultures" (15), a sentiment that may inadvertently reinforce problematic notions of Persian cultural singularity and continuity. The subsequent chapters, however, do not focus on the question of a uniquely Persian sensory attitude. Instead, they broadly respond to Beard's instructive suggestion that critics "look at the narrative networks which hold [the senses] in place" (23) in Persian language texts.

Given that this volume draws on a diverse set of primary sources, the editors of *Losing Our Minds* have elected to organize the essays chronologically, in order of the main primary source text analyzed within each. In doing so, they hope to eschew the imposition of an "artificial uniformity" (9) on the volume's varied contributions. However, a methodologically oriented structure for the volume's myriad sensorial approaches would have been a welcome aid to the reader. Despite the stylistic and theoretical distinctions between the chapters, there seem to be three main categories of sensory analysis that the contributors enact: topographical readings that perform intrinsic analysis of literary texts; reception-based extrinsic readings; and readings that question the very concept of what the senses are. I will organize my reading of the edited volume through these categories.

Topographical Readings

Khorrami and Moosavi convincingly argue that the senses play an important narratological role in the structures of their chosen literary texts and, in so doing, successfully reorient their critical gaze from the sociopolitical and ideological elements of these texts to their often under-analyzed aesthetic and stylistic aspects. Khorrami also asserts that paying attention to the aesthetic "surface" of a text, such as a short story by Parviz Dava'i or a ghazal by Hafez, can be a profoundly pleasurable act for the reader, making sensory readings not just

an innovative scholarly exercise but also a mode of revolutionizing “everyday life” (26). Moosavi, meanwhile, expands his argument for sensory studies beyond his close reading of Hossein Morteziyān Ābkenār’s novella *‘Aqrab* (Scorpion) by demonstrating the relevance of a sensory approach for productively analyzing literature from the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988). The chapters of both Khorrami and Moosavi offer a productive methodological road map for carrying out sensory studies.

Fatemeh Shams, in her chapter, is the only contributor to enact a transnational, comparative form of sensory analysis. Shams compares various works from the Afghan poet Elyās ‘Alavi to the Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa on the basis of their shared articulation of “border consciousness” in corporeal, or sensorial, terms (195). Although Shams’s transnational comparison is methodologically brave given that the structure of area studies-based departments does not typically encourage comparative work between Persian-speaking and Spanish- (or Spanglish-) speaking writers, the essay ultimately flattens significant differences between ‘Alavi and Anzaldúa on the basis of a shared use of corporeal language. Shams diligently enumerates the instances in which ‘Alavi and Anzaldúa mention taste, touch, or smell, but her resulting analyses of those senses is chiefly allegorical and does not explore the potential stylistic or aesthetic meanings of these sensory invocations.

M. R. Ghanoonparvar sifts through Moniro Ravanipour’s *Shab’hā-ye shurangiz* (translated into English by Ghanoonparvar himself as *These Crazy Nights*) with the explicitly stated intention of avoiding sociopolitical conclusions to highlight the role of the senses in the text. However, as Ghanoonparvar himself admits, his analysis “merely scratch[es] the surface” of the text (238). The chapter chiefly identifies where and how *Shab’hā-ye shurangiz* evokes sensory descriptions but does not make a significant argument as to why these are aesthetically or stylistically important for a critical consideration of the novel. For this reason, the chapter reads like a book synopsis and shows how sensory approaches may fall flat.

Extrinsic Readings

In her chapter, Sheida Dayani contests prevailing analyses of contemporary Iranian participation in *Ta’ziyeh* plays through her invocation of the field of sensory studies. In contrast to claims that Iranians engage in *Ta’ziyeh* plays only as an expression of religious fervor, or as a sado-masochistic way of inflicting self-harm, Dayani argues that participants are drawn to the ceremonies because they give participants the opportunity to cope with trauma on a bodily level and experience corporeal catharsis. Dayani interprets sensory studies quite broadly to incorporate any bodily experience. But, although the connection made to sensory studies is perhaps a bit tenuous, the argument for reading *Ta’ziyeh* plays as art is compelling and novel.

In a comprehensive reading of the 1950s-era Iranian periodical *Shuresh*, Neda Bolourchi argues that the newspaper, despite being a written product, was actually intended to be consumed in a visual and aural-oral environment and thus relied heavily on illustrated images, the color red, and “bombastic rhetoric” (120) to entice the ears and eyes of the illiterate and semiliterate, factors that explain the popularity and central role of the paper in Iranian society at the time. Bolourchi shows how, through a sensory approach, critics can revisit texts such as *Shuresh*, which were previously the topic of academic scorn, and can find new meanings within them.

Also emphasizing the importance of orality, Yass Alizadeh examines two Iranian folktales and the central metaphors they contain. Alizadeh argues that the unique, oral texture of these tales shakes up the stories’ meanings, making content-based, ideological readings lose their deterministic power. This chapter is useful in its assessment of the power of orality and the implied sense of hearing in the folktale genre. But, as a whole, the chapter’s connections to sensory studies feel murky; Alizadeh invokes concepts such as “common sense” (157) and “sense and sensibility” (165) in ways that are unclear and unfocused, or perhaps overly metaphorical.

Redefining the Senses

Finally, there are two chapters that seek to unsettle the very notion of the senses. In his chapter, Ali-Asghar Seyed-Gohrab posits that Rumi's sensory philosophy was based on the premise that there were "five internal and five external senses" (50), the latter of which the thirteenth-century poet disparaged as a hindrance to achieving spiritual insight. Seyed-Gohrab's chapter, although persuasive as an independent article, is methodologically quite distinct from the rest of the volume's contributions. The chapter becomes more compelling, however, when put in dialogue with Domenico Ingenito's *Beholding Beauty*, a recent publication that employs a sensory approach to reading Sa'di.¹ Whereas Seyed-Gohrab stresses that Rumi thought little of the material external senses, Ingenito puts forth the opposite argument about Sa'di, claiming that the poet actually embraced the external senses for their aesthetic pleasure. This difference illustrates the potential of sensory studies to irradiate new realms of debate within Persian studies.

Shabnam Piryaee also makes a case for broadening our notion of the senses through her chapter on Forugh Farrokhzād's *Khāneh Siyah-ast* (The House is Black). Not content to limit her analysis of the 1962 film to "the body's senses," (146) Piryaee insists that Farrokhzād also makes use of emotional and psychological senses to affect the viewer. In this way, Piryaee argues that an expanded understanding of human perceptual capacity allows for us to cultivate a "radical openness" when critically approaching the film (136). Just as the editors of *Losing Our Minds* argue, Piryaee shows how a sensory approach can serve as a "rupture to the violence of an absolute and singular understanding" (136) of Persian literary and cultural products.

The application of a specifically sensory approach to Persian studies is a new practice, but departure from strict, exclusively sociopolitical readings is generally gaining more momentum in the field. In both *Persian Literature as World Literature* and *Persian Literature and Modernity*, scholars of Persian and Iranian studies have recently challenged the hegemony of the area studies-based approaches to Persian cultural and literary studies and have made strides toward opening up the hermeneutical conversation.² Overall, *Losing Our Minds, Coming to Our Senses* is an accessible, creative, and exciting addition to this expanding toolbox of methodologies, uneven though the volume's applications of this approach may be.

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Iran in Motion: Mobility, Space, and the Trans-Iranian Railway, Mikiya Koyagi, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021, ISBN: 9781503613133 (hbk), 296 pages.

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Iran in Motion: Mobility, Space, and the Trans-Iranian Railway examines the history of the Trans-Iranian Railway from its early imaginings in the 1860s, during the late-Qajar period, to its construction and use in the two World Wars and their 1940s aftermath. Covering

¹ Domenico Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty: Sa'di of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

² Mostafa Abedinifard, Omid Azadibougar, and Amirhossein Vafa, eds., *Persian Literature as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021); Hamid Rezai Yazdi and Arshavez Mozafari, eds., *Persian Literature and Modernity: Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 2019).