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Constructing Nationalism in Iran

From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic

Edited by Meir Litvak

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4 Four iterations of Persian literary nationalism

Nasrin Rahimieh

The question of nationalism in Persian literary historiography requires a lengthy study well beyond the scope of this analysis. I propose to focus on four articulations of Persian literary nationalism that range from arguing for Iran to adopt a modern national literary sensibility to positing a national literature distinct from its modern European counterparts. The examples I have chosen exemplify what I see as a desire for a modern national identity and a nationalist tendency that actively rewrites history and occasionally offers anachronistic readings of premodern and early modern Persian literature.

The emergence of a national literature in Persian is interwoven with the history of Iran's encounter with Europe and the perception of differences in literary form and language between Persian and European literatures that were read as signs of Iran's arrested development and/or lack of progress. The standard adopted for this assessment was a modern European literature presumed to be homogenous. From this Eurocentric perspective, Iran needed a literary institution capable of meeting the demands of a modern nation-state, itself in the making. The Iranian intellectuals and literati who had learned European languages and gained knowledge of literatures of European expression became the conduits for a concept of literature as a platform for the forging of a national identity that would inform and reform all aspects of Iranian culture, society and politics. Thus framed, modern Persian literature might well be viewed in terms of Fredric Jameson's nearly three decade old theorization of Third World literature as national allegories:

> Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*[1]

The critiques leveled at Jameson for this formulation are too well known to be rehearsed here.[2] Instead, following Imre Szeman's footsteps, I would like

to shift the focus to what Jameson's conceptualization offers "as the condition of possibility for the practice of writing *literature* [. . .] in the task of a cultural revolution."[3]

I invoke Szeman because, like him, I see a more nuanced relationship between the nation, modernity and nationalism. Within the early phases of modern Persian literary history, the relationship between literature and nation-building points to the emergence of an understanding of literature as a "force for bringing about a substantive political transformation."[4] Iranian literary nationalism, as I will argue, emerged at the intersection of modernity and national formation. By tracing the path traversed by Iranian literati in their effort to remake Persian literature in the modern idiom, I will illustrate how literary modernity was envisioned as a means of liberating the nation and how it was co-opted by a linguistic and literary nationalism that continues to haunt conceptualizations of Persian literature.

For the first example I will focus on a nineteenth-century figure, Mirza Fath 'Ali Akhundzadeh (1812–1878), and the manner in which he is presented by Iraj Parsinejad in his monograph *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran (1866–1951): Literary Criticism in the Works of Enlightened Thinkers of Iran: Akhundzade, Kermani, Malkom, Talebof, Maraghe'i, Kasravi and Hedayat.* Parsinejad provides an excellent overview and selected translations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century assessments of what was believed to be lacking in Persian literature of the time. As the subtitle of Parsinejad's book indicates, the inception of what we might call modern literary criticism in Persian is part and parcel of intellectual and political movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The figures Parsinejad selects for inclusion in his study were not necessarily known for producing fiction. They had a broader concern with reforming Iranian institutions, literature among them. In Parsinejad's own words:

> While these intellectuals were principally interested in toppling the political and social order of the time, they also attacked the literature that served the system. Taken together, their critiques make up the historical background of literary criticism, in the modern sense, in Iran.[5]

The interchangeability of the work of the enlightened intellectual and social, political, and literary and cultural criticism is rooted in the adoption of a particular concept of the intellectual whose genealogy Mehrzad Boroujerdi describes:

> The Russian intelligentsia referred to that class of Tsarist elites who had undergone European education, and who had vowed to act as committed and revolutionary agents of cultural transformation. In Iran it was this Russian definition of intellectuals as agents of progressive and radical change that was particularly circulated until the early 1960s.[6]

The prevalence of this understanding of the role of the intellectual is evident in Parsinejad's study as well as the figures on whom he focuses his analysis.

In Akhundzadeh we find the type of Renaissance man whose origins in the Caucasus, more specifically territories Iran ceded to Russia at the outcome of a devastating military loss in 1812, and whose education and experiences gave him insights he felt compelled to share with his compatriots to the south.[7] His having witnessed a redrawing of national borders and having traversed other territories in the Caucasus gave him at once the perspective of an insider and outsider. As a native speaker of Azeri who published both in Persian and Azeri, Akhundzadeh was also keenly aware of his own multiple affiliations. As we shall see, when writing in Persian about Iranian identity, he invokes a filial bond that transcends the borders that separate him from his interlocutors in Iran. These conditions of liminality affected his view of Iranian culture and incited him to call for transformations in Iranian cultural institutions without echoing the kind of linguistic nationalism that would have aligned him more to his Azeri heritage. His work predates the splintering into more narrowly defined constructs of linguistic nationalism we will witness in later stages of Persian literary history. Akhundzadeh is focused on the very creation of an institution that would ironically erect more rigid boundaries between the speakers of Azeri and Persian. He zeroes in on what he finds lacking in Persian: a critical apparatus for understanding and appreciation of Persian letters. He offers an interesting example of an exchange occasioned by a critical review of a history by Reza Qoli Khan Hedayat:

> Having sent these exchanges to the editorial office of the Tehran newspaper, I should make it clear that this is a convention in Europe, replete with great benefits. For instance, when someone writes a book, someone else writes about the flaws in his subject matter, provided no hurtful or discourteous words are used about the author and everything you say is expressed with humor. This procedure is called Qeritika ("critique" in French). The author then answers the critic, and a third person is found who either confirms the author's rebuttal or supports the critic's arguments. As a result, verse, prose and fiction in every European language gradually gain in viability and become cleansed of all flaws, as far as possible. Writers and monarchs become fully informed of their duties and obligations. If this convention spreads in Iran, too, by means of the Tehran newspaper, it will undoubtedly result in progress for future generations in learning the languages of the East.[8]

Akhundzadeh's description of a review process preceding publication is presented with clarity, but nothing in the passage explains the leap he makes between this process and writers and monarchs becoming accountable to their interlocutors and/or subjects. How precisely this accountability is achieved is left to be inferred. Implied in this passage is (1) the possibility and viability of differing perspectives, (2) the desirability of dialogue, (3) the possibility of altering and or adapting one's perspective, (4) the accrual of authority through expertise, (5) an opening up of the category of knowledge and (6) inherited power being equally subject to the changing nature of knowledge. The very extension of an editorial practice to governing a nation, undeveloped as it is, exemplifies the centrality of the ideal of improving on exiting institutions for Akhundzadeh and other nineteenth-century Iranian intellectuals. The correspondence he sees between reforming a publishing process and national governance relies on distribution of power away from one singular source, be it the author, the editor, or the king. The interchangeability of editorial process and national governance is a crucial determinant in the logic at work. Akhundzadeh's essay on literary criticism thus is shorthand for political reform. Contrary to Parsinejad's claim that these early intellectuals must be read in the context of the introduction of rationalism,[9] there is little attention paid to logical progression. Parsinejad's framing of the work of nineteenth-century Iranian intellectuals shares in the assumption of Iran's belated enlightenment and thus historicizes Persian literature from within this Eurocentric paradigm. But Akhundzadeh's own writing appears to be preoccupied with creating a space for a more open and informed social and political structure. This motive is amply evident in Akhundzadeh's "Criticism" (*Qeritika*).[10]

This essay, a letter addressed to the editor of an Iranian daily in 1866, first challenges the newspaper's adoption of the image of a mosque as a national symbol. Identifying himself as "an inhabitant of the Caucasus, united in brotherhood with the nation of Iran in point of Islam and religion," Akhundzadeh argues for the inclusion of a symbol "that recalls, on the one hand, the ancient kings of Iran and, on the other, the Safavid rulers."[11] This invocation of the ancient and pre-Islamic past gained much more resonance in later chapters of Iranian cultural history. In Akhundzadeh's essay, it serves as a prefiguration of the nationalism that I will analyze later in this chapter.

The recommendation to open up the symbolic forms of identification gives way to more detailed suggestions for making the newspaper into a public space for dialogue, debate and critique:

> To the extent possible your newspaper should even include critiques of the actions and conduct of officials, authorities, governors, commanders, and all office-holders as well as the 'ulama, such as those responsible for the decimation of the king's Jewish subjects in Mazandaran. These people must know that their actions will in no way remain secret. They must be warned and instilled with fear of ill-repute, so that they may exert themselves in fulfilling their commitment of service at the good pleasure of the king, their liege lord, in a spirit of patriotism without deviating from the straight path of justice.[12]

The link between writing and political reform is amply clear, as is the desired correlation between the exercise of power and forms of accountability. The

role Akhundzadeh ascribes to 'criticism' is not confined to the realm of literary criticism, although he offers examples of his own critical analyses of poetic works as models for a new mode of literary criticism. Criticism, as expounded by Akhundzadeh, is a means to raising public awareness distinct from religious guidance and moral exhortation. By also curtailing religious authority, Akhundzadeh creates a new arena for examining, debating, and ultimately refining cultural, literary and political practices. His objective is twofold: to approximate what he holds up as the superior European civilization and to end "enmity and internal strife between the people and the government"[13] in Iran, which would result in "the good of the state and the people"[14] being united. The concept of 'critique' served as a building block for a democratization that was taken up by the next generation of Iranian literati.

A second particularly important figure in the discussion of the inseparability of literacy, literary expression, and democracy is Mohammad 'Ali Jamalzadeh (1892–1997) who was equally critical of the status quo in the Iranian political and cultural spheres. It is interesting to note that, like Akhundzadeh, Jamalzadeh's views on Persian letters was shaped by his experiences outside the boundaries of the nation. Apart from his childhood and early youth, Jamalzadeh lived his life outside Iran. Despite this geographic distance, Jamalzadeh not only maintained his ties to Iran but also, in the words of Hassan Kamshad, brought about a "renaissance in Persian letters" and became "one of the innovators of modern literary language."[15] It was Jamalzadeh's position as an outsider that enabled him to draw comparisons between literary and cultural institutions in Iran and elsewhere. We see this relationship foregrounded in his first and influential collection of short stories, *Yeki bud, yeki nabud*.

He begins the preface to the collection with this bold assessment of the state of the nation's literary institution: "Today Iran is behind on the road of literature compared to most of the countries of the world."[16] Originally published in Berlin in 1921, this collection of stories and the preface that accompanies it exemplify the perceptions that contributed to thinking of literature as the conveyor and the medium for a national self-actualization. Jamalzadeh goes on to lay the blame for the absence of what he calls "literary democracy" on Iran's fundamental political autocracy and the absence of a compulsory education system. For Jamalzadeh the most immediate manifestation of an oppressive literary regime is a writer's apparent singular focus on the fellow literati rather than the multitudes capable of reading and understanding simpler texts. The responsibility, he believes, rests with the writer who "does not subscribe to 'literary democracy.' " He uses the term democracy as a counterpoint to the elitism he believes to be prevailing in the Iranian literary and cultural circles.

> The novel, with its charming language, engaging and pleasant style which refreshes the mind and soul and generates joy and exhilaration, teaches us necessary and useful information, be it historical or scientific, philosophical or ethical. It also brings together different classes of people who, by virtue of the differences of job, occupation, and social intercourse, are completely ignorant of one another's living conditions and thoughts, and even details of each other's way of life, and familiarizes them with one another.[17]

Interestingly, Jamalzadeh, like Akhundzadeh, attributes a didactic function to the novel, a means of making the nation transparent to itself and others: "It can be said that the novel is the best mirror for showing the moral composition and special characteristics of nations and peoples."[18] Jamalzadeh relies primarily on the French literary canon for developing his ideas about the efficacy of the novel and for establishing a link between the novel and its "contribution to the language of the people."[19] He draws on a personal experience to argue for adopting a more readily comprehensible medium of communication:

> Once the writer of these lines happened to meet a famous scholar from that nation who knew thousands of lines from the divans of Persian poets by heart; nevertheless we had to communicate in French – he did not understand my Persian and I seldom comprehended his Persian. The cause of such a problem is obvious: there is no book available written in ordinary current Persian to be used for teaching the language, and our writers think it below their dignity to put pen to paper for writing prose, and even when they want to write prose it is inconceivable that they would write in a style less grand that that of Sa'adi.[20]

While Akhundzadeh had singled out some of the poets of the premodern era for their allusive and indirect language, Jamalzadeh makes an important distinction between spoken and written Persian. But he too advocates the adoption of a simplified prose he believes would ensue from the development of the genre of the novel in Persian. Ironically Jamalzadeh makes these recommendations on the occasion of publishing a collection of short stories, instead of a novel. But he illustrates his point about the need for a simpler Persian in his famous short story "Persian Is Sugar."

The title of the short story alludes to Classical Persian poetry and the many poetic plays on the intrinsic splendor and eloquence of Persian. Jamalzadeh plays on this tradition to call into question the accessibility and expressiveness of the literary Persian of his times. The title also gestures toward a rich poetic heritage that despite its artfulness could gain currency and popularity through an oral tradition.

"Persian Is Sugar" is a first-person narrative that tells the story of a return journey from Europe to the shores of the Caspian Sea. The backdrop of the story is the period following the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) and the ensuing turmoil. In this story, political upheaval manifests itself in the customs office exercising arbitrary power. As a result, the unnamed narrator

and two other travelers are thrown in a dark and forbidding jail. Soon a local man, named Ramazan, joins them in the cell. Terrified and unable to fathom the reasons for his arrest, Ramazan attempts to strike up a conversation with the first person he notices in the cell. This happens to be a clergyman who speaks a Persian so heavily inflected with Arabic as to be incomprehensible to the distressed Ramazan. The second man to whom Ramazan turns for solace, who has been all along immersed in a French novel, speaks his own brand of incomprehensible Persian interspersed with French words. Observing these exchanges is the narrator, ironically taken for a foreigner by Ramazan, who unlike the other two cellmates speaks a simple Persian: "As soon as Ramazan saw that I really and truly understood the vernacular and that I was even speaking honest-to-God Persian with him, he grabbed my hand and kissed it as if there were no tomorrow."[21] Neither the affectations of the clergy nor those of the Europeanized Iranian, the short story demonstrates, can soothe the panic-stricken Ramazan who prefers the most severe forms of corporeal punishment to being left in a prison cell with the two individuals whose language he cannot understand. What causes Ramazan to "lose control of himself completely"[22] is the fear of being deprived of the means of communication, that is Persian.

Ironically this story is set in a border town whose own primary means of exchange is not Persian but rather the local Gilaki. Persian was not necessarily the primary means of exchange across the different regions of Iran during the early years of the twentieth century. The scene Jamalzadeh depicts in his short story could well have been realized with Iranians of different ethnicities and languages who are incidentally acknowledged in the preface I discussed earlier. But the internal linguistic complexities of Iran are not of interest to Jamalzadeh in this instance. He zeroes in on a border town metaphorically exposed to foreign infiltration and influence to advocate for vernacular Persian as a national language.

It is the staging of this moment of formation for which "Persian Is Sugar" has aptly become known in the history of Persian letters. It captures a zeitgeist Kamran Talattof calls "Persianism," which he describes as a

> literary episode that reflected upon and deeply criticized many aspects of Iranian national characteristics, including social life and traditional culture but excluding Persian language. The Persian language was considered the most truthful and admirable index of the Iranian heritage. The task was, therefore, to purify and secularize this language and, at times, to show how damaging the seventh-century Islamic conquest of Persian had been to Iranian culture and society.[23]

Talattof distinguishes Persianism from nationalism:

> The most important writers of this period [. . .] did not pursue nationalism. They are not known to have ever actively participated in any nationalist movement. They did not support their nation-state, native soil, culture, traditions, or territorial authorities but instead left Iran to live in Europe or in isolation.[24]

Without quibbling with this particular view of nationalism or the presumed uncritical treatment of language, it is possible to distinguish Jamalzadeh's views from the brands of nationalism that developed later and coalesced around a racialized, to say nothing of racist, narration of Iranian national identity.

In the works of Jamalzadeh and even those of Akhundzadeh, there is a great deal of focus on the nation "as an imagined political community," in Benedict Anderson's formulation.[25] More specifically it is the desire for a modern style nation-state that is foregrounded, as is the need for a national language, literary institution, and national culture. The choice to affiliate with Iran primarily through language was itself a form of reterritorialization and creation of a virtual national identity on par with what Akhundzadeh and Jamalzadeh had glimpsed in Europe. To follow Anderson's paradigm further, there is a perceptible change in the "style in which"[26] the nation is imagined, and in these imagined constructs we can discern the contours of linguistic nationalism. For the Iranian literati of the time the idea of the nation-state was inseparable from an official language. These articulations of nationalism melded onto an 'official nationalism' that became increasingly focused on language and race as signs of Iran's unique and distinct identity. The official nationalism adopted by the ruling Pahlavi monarchs capitalized on Iran's pre-Islamic legacy and wove it into a narrative of seemingly uninterrupted history of monarchy dating back to Cyrus the Great and the empire that collapsed with the arrival of Islam.

The conflation of official nationalism and nostalgia for a lost empire, although top-down, did not go unacknowledged by all Iranians. Its sympathizers were among the very groups and classes Anderson identifies as typically inclined toward it: "In the end, it is always the ruling classes, bourgeois certainly, but above all aristocratic, that mourn the empires, and their grief always has a stagey quality to it."[27]

This vision of the Iranian national identity did not make inroads among the intellectuals and literati who saw literature and their own contribution to it as a means of combating the injustices and inequalities of the times. In his historicization of Persian literature, Talattof describes this in terms of a shift from the 'Persianism' of the earlier generation to a revolutionary movement in literature:

> literature in this episode became the medium most appropriate in the eyes of all groups for communicating the revolutionary messages about sociopolitical change, which they envisioned would improve the condition of the Iranian people.[28]

Little wonder that the very institutions that had been created as necessary conditions of national consciousness came in for critique. If the earlier generations had opined about the absence of the apparatus of learning, the literati of the decades preceding the revolution found fault with the kinds of knowledge imparted and their apparent disconnect from the daily existence of the masses. In this iteration too, language and literature are treated as crucial components of national formation and reformation. But, as we glimpse in the work of Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969), one of the most vocal and prominent literati of the time, the West is far from an ideal object of emulation: the Iranian institutions molded on the Western model are seen as having failed to rise up to the challenges faced by Iranian society. In his famous treatise, *Gharbzadegi* (*Stricken with the West*), Al-e Ahmad takes aim at universities and seminaries at once:

> Day by day we see the dominion of foreign languages expanding and replacing the importance and need for our own tongue; day by day the technical and scientific fields of study divert greater numbers of potential students from fields in humanities, ethics, and literature. Islamic and Iranian studies [. . .] become each day less important and more obscure. In this way, our centers of literature, law, and Islamic studies (i.e., their respective university faculties) are just like the clerical establishment which, in the face of the onslaught of the West, took refuge in the cocoon of fanaticism and intransigence. These centers have taken refuge in the cocoon of old manuscripts and are satisfied with turning out pedants of punctuation who know nothing about meaning.[29]

For Al-e Ahmad, there is an implicit missing link: the potential for transforming the social and the political. Language, literature and literary studies, and we might add other humanist endeavors, must be put in the service of making a society transparent to itself and providing the impetus for seeking improved social and political conditions. This view of literature as doing the work of politics continues to maintain an inextricable link between literature and the idea of nation as an imagined community perennially working toward the common ideal. That ideal was put to the test through the Revolution of 1979.

The success of the revolution and the subsequent formation of an Islamic Republic culminated in the imposition of a shared narrative of national belonging as uniformly rooted in Shi'i Islam. The new strictures about how one might imagine oneself as part of this new shared identity and culture have inevitably produced counter-narratives that invoke alternative nationalisms. I would like accordingly to focus on two more particular instances of literary nationalism, both produced outside the borders of Iran: Shahrokh Meskoob's *Melliyyat va zaban* (*Iranian Nationality and the Persian Language*) from 1989 and Hamid Dabashi's *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* from 2013. There is an interesting continuity between these two scholars and literati and their nineteenth- and twentieth-century predecessors who also addressed a nation from which they were geographically removed. And yet, they invoke a shared community they offer up in their narrations of Iran's cultural and literary past.

An intellectual and scholar displaced by the 1979 Revolution, the late Meskoob (1924–2005) explains in the preface to the Persian edition of the collected essays that the impetus for the volume was a discussion he attended in Paris on the subject of "Language, Nationality, and Autonomy." Surprised by the participants' lack of knowledge about Persian language and the history of its development, Meskoob felt a compelling need to provide an antidote in the form of a historical overview from a particular methodological standpoint he describes in the following passage:

> On the basis of the inference I draw from history, or rather, from truth in general (and here "sociohistorical truth"), my study is more in the nature of a proposal in the sense of suggestive juxtaposition, of sketching the subject and presenting issues (sometimes only hypotheses) which may stimulate reflection and perhaps shed light on the issues. In the course of this book I hope to communicate to readers my sense of "historical truth." For the moment, suffice it to say that what I am presenting to readers is primarily an invitation to reflect on a corner of Iranian cultural history and to rethink that cultural history, nothing more, and not the exposition of facts which a writer might consider certain and indisputable. My remarks are conceptions about truths, not necessarily truth itself.[30]

Setting himself apart from a chronicler of facts, Meskoob embarks on a path he sees as beneficial to his compatriots: "It will be strange if the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 does not [. . .] stimulate Iranians to return to their own history and reexamine the past from the vantage point and behind the windowpanes of the present."[31] Interestingly the "windowpanes of the present" are endowed with the capacity to bring into focus selected segments of the past or to allow the observer selective powers of observation. Meskoob's emphasis on the urgency of the need to reexamine Iranian history is at least in part rooted in his own displacement and sense of rupture that he deftly maps onto a collective past:

> after suffering defeat at the hands of the Arabs and after converting to Islam, the Iranian people also returned to the past. They turned back from one great historical event to history. Like Arabs, Iranians were now Muslims, but they had a different language. In the tenth century, when they organized their own first regional governments and concomitantly wrote and composed poetry in their own language, they assumed the characters of a discrete and independent people or nation. They were well aware of this fact. After four hundred years, when all

> other means and attempts to secede from Arab domination had failed, Iranians turned to history, some with the aim of secession from Islam as well. For their own preservation as a separate nation, they returned to their own history, and took a stand in the stronghold of their language. They turned to two things that differentiated them from other Muslims.[32]

Meskoob's exile from the Islamic Republic is analogous to the alienation he describes among the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau after the defeat of the Sassanid Empire at the hands of the Arabs. Despite their having embraced Islam, Meskoob demonstrates, the newly minted Muslims maintained their distinctness. He invites his readers to engage in the same re-envisioning of history he ascribes to the Muslim Iranians of the seventh century.

Following his method, Meskoob can hardly be faulted for his glossing over details of history. Presumably for the purposes of historical research we can and will turn to historians who would offer counterclaims, such as Gnoli's:

> The historical development of the idea of Iran is, in actual fact, complex and far from being straightforward. Suffice it to mention the part played by the Mongols and, in any case, by non-Iranian ethnic groups. And a perspective based on a presumed opposition between Arabs and Iranians would be equally erroneous.[33]

But Meskoob is not interested in historical accuracy and, as we have seen, is embarked on his own brand of historical truth. His essays are meant to recall the patterns along which a sense of collectivity was preserved through the medium of language and to appeal to Iranians who appear to have lost sight of the lessons of history. Ending his book on a brief discussion of the Constitutional Revolution, Meskoob concludes with this plea and warning:

> For nearly a century [literary intellectuals and writers] have shouldered the burden of nurturing Iranian nationality and the Persian language. One can only hope that they prove capable of leading Persian language to its next stage and the fate of the language and the people who speak it is better tomorrow than it is today.[34]

The anxiety underwriting Meskoob's plea is an expression of his desire for privileging language over religion in the way Iran as a shared community is imagined. In a remarkably self-reflective passage, he lays bare the conditions that have shaped his own history of Persian language and Iranian identity:

> Historical writing usually views the past from the vantage point of issues of the present. In the midst of pressing social problems and phenomena of his own age, the historian sees the past through them and from within the atmosphere in which he lives. For this reason, histories written in different periods about a more distant past have different viewpoints and interpretations. Every history has within it the personality of the writer's age.[35]

Writing about the past thus becomes for Meskoob a means of recruiting a community of like-minded Iranians displaced by a revolution that culminated in forceful imposition of a new official vision of national identity. In contrast to Meskoob, our fourth figure, Hamid Dabashi (b. 1951) anchors his vision in what might be called the canonical works of Classical Persian literature, but not without invoking linguistic nationalism.

Dabashi's *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* does not begin from a presumed position of inferiority or belatedness but rather posits the multifaceted term *adab* as an equal to humanism. Dabashi makes a specific case by invoking well-known lines by the thirteenth-century poet Sa'adi likening humanity to the human body and the impossibility of one limb's pain not affecting the others. Of particular relevance to Dabashi's discussion is the last hemistich: "Thou who art indifferent to others' misfortune,/You are unworthy to be named human."[36]

The Persian word Sa'adi uses to describe the condition of being human is *adami* from the word Adam, which to quote Dabashi, "means both a human being and the state of being a human being, or just 'humanity' or even 'humanism,' if we were to allow ourselves a bit of leeway."[37] The leeway he allows himself inaugurates a literary historiography that rests on a foundational resistance of Persian to the dominance of Arabic, the language of the victors and conquerors. Dabashi posits Persian as "peripherally vernacular and the language of cultural resistance to Arabic imperialism in the western Islamic world,"[38] and yet aware of its own domination of non-Persian languages in the eastern Islamic world.

These conditions, he maintains, endowed Persian language and literature with innate paradoxes. Equally significant to Dabashi's conceptualization is the centrality of the lyrical mode of expression in Persian and the absence of gender markers in Persian that render the "lyrical subject [. . .] at the heart of Persian lyricism ipso facto decentered, unreliable, evasive."[39] The uncertainty and fragility Dabashi pinpoints in Persian poetry is set against a backdrop of what he terms the 'feminization' of Persian language and literature on the part of Arabic culture:

> As Arabic became the paternal language of the hegemonic theology, jurisprudence, philosophy, and science, the maternal Persian, the language of mothers' lullabies and wandering singers, songwriters, storytellers, and poets, constituted the subversive literary imagination of a poetic conception of being.[40]

This narrative of the 'feminine disposition'[41] of Persian literary humanism plays upon a linguistic nationalism we have already glimpsed in Meskoob's

work. What distinguishes Dabashi's approach is the expansion of what had been confined to the realm of the Persian-speaking collectivity to the "lingua franca of cultural resistance to Arab imperialism."[42] The Persian language, Dabashi contends, "made the Persianate world possible, and the making of that world was the political disposition of successive empires that laid claims on the poets and the literati who represented and furthered their legitimacy."[43] The history thus crafted for Persian literature insists on equivalencies of sorts between Persian and European language literatures of the premodern and early modern era. But the similarities end abruptly in the modern era.

In the chapter "New Persian Literary Humanism," devoted to the literary and cultural production between 1906 and the present, Dabashi argues:

> What I have put forward in this book is a theory of subjection from within the historical matrix of Persian literary humanism to which the entire European spectrum of tradition, modernity, and postmodernity is entirely tangential. This is a reading of Persian literary humanism that in fact overcomes the notion of "modernity" altogether.[44]

And in his critique of Persian literary historiography he demonstrates that "European Orientalists and American literary comparatists alike mutilated the history of Persian literary humanism."[45] The counter-narrative offered by Dabashi turns against Western paradigms precisely at the crucial juncture of a power imbalance:

> The frame of reference in Persian literary humanism has always been "power," and as the Qajars began to lose it so did poets and literati begin to wonder and wander around and be drawn to the emerging centers of power.[46]

And these wanderings are what he aims to curb in his recentering of Persian literary historiography by invoking a humanism he attributes to the very emergence of a literary consciousness shaped against Arab/Islamic dominance.

As the term humanism is not without its own history and European legacy, this version of literary and cultural history does not escape the European frame of reference that had such a hold on intellectuals like Akhundzadeh. Like his predecessors, Dabashi is eager to establish a linguistic and literary autonomy for Persian outside the spheres of European and Arabic literatures. But his very use of the concept of humanism raises the specter of categories of analysis that cannot be divorced from their European legacy. The internal contradictions of Dabashi's argument recall some of his predecessors' conviction in literature's potential to bring about a national awakening and fulfill the promise of a shared and cohesive national identity. The achievement of

what Etienne Balibar calls a "retrospective illusion"[47] requires the critic or the literary historian to forgo the very idea of "literary democracy" held up by Jamalzadeh. The nation addressed by Meskoob and Dabashi has emerged from a revolution but still needs to be reminded of having fallen short of its destiny.

The history of modern Persian literature, as manifested in the four examples I have examined, is inextricably interwoven with the construction of a national identity. From its inception modern Persian literature has been put in the service of raising awareness about, articulating, and upholding a cohesive national identity. This intertwining of literary expression, literary criticism, literary historiography, and national identity have positioned writers and literati either at odds with the dominant ideological and political discourses of the times or endowed them with a heavy social and political charge. Different iterations of this overarching understanding of literature have remained concerned with the fate of the nation and the promise of a cultural revolution.

Notes

1 Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" *Social Text*, 15 (1986): 69. Italics in the original.

2 For one of the most cogent critiques of Jameson's essay, see Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,' " in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992; London: Verso, 2008), 95–122.

3 Imre Szeman, *Zones of Instability: Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 56.

4 Ibid., 1.

5 Iraj Parsinejad, *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran (1866–1951): Literary Criticism in the Works of Enlightened Thinkers of Iran: Akhundzade, Kermani, Malkom, Talebof, Maraghe'i, Kasravi and Hedayat* (Bethesda, MD: IBEX, 2003), 11.

6 Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 23.

7 Ali Gheissari places Akhundzadeh's trajectory alongside others who moved within and across the same regions:

> The earliest contacts between Russian and Iranian intellectuals can be traced back to Fath-Ali Akhundzadeh and, later, to 'Abdol-Rahim Talebof. Iranian workers in the Caucusus, mainly in and around the oilfields, were a conduit for[radical socialist and communist ideas], as were Iranian merchants, who by the late nineteenth century had established commercial bureaus in Baku, Tiflis, and other trading centers in the Caucusus.

In *Iranian Intellectuals in the 20th Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 18.

8 Ibid., 295.

9 Ibid., 23.

> In examining the development of modern literary criticism in Iran, we need to focus our attention on social criticism, and outgrowth of the rise of critical thought in Iranian society. Critical thought, the product of a rational

attitude, concerns itself primarily with opposition to entrenched political and economic institutions. Subsequently it proceeds to a consideration of cultural manifestations (of which literature is one) and challenges whatever is contrary to logic and reason.

10 Parsinejad's transliteration is a deliberate reflection of the "Russian *kritika*, Itself a Rendering of the French *critique*," 267.
11 Ibid., 267–268.
12 Ibid., 286.
13 Ibid., 319.
14 Ibid.
15 Hassan Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature* (Bethesda, MD: IBEX, 1996), 91.
16 Haideh Daragahi, "The Shaping of Modern Persian Prose Short Story: Jamalzadih's 'Preface' to *Yeki bud, Yeki nabud*," in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Persian Literature*, ed. Thomas M. Ricks (Washington, DC: Three Continents Press, 1984), 110. This piece includes Daragahi's English translation of Jamalzadeh's "Preface."
17 Ibid., 113.
18 Ibid., 114.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 115.
21 Mohammad Ali Jamalzada, *Once upon a Time (Yeki bud, Yeki nabud)*, trans. Heshmat Moayyad and Paul Sprachman (New York: Caravan, 1985), 41.
22 Ibid., 40.
23 Kamran Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 25.
24 Ibid., 24.
25 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6: "It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 111.
28 Talattof, *The Politics*, 67.
29 Jalal Al-i Ahmad, *Plagued by the West (Gharbzadegi)*, trans. Paul Sprachman (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1982), 92.
30 Shahrokh Meskoob, *Iranian Nationality and the Persian Language*, trans. Michael Hillmann (Washington, DC: Mage, 1992), 28.
31 Ibid., 34.
32 Ibid., 34–35.
33 Gherardo Gnoli, *The Idea of Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 182.
34 Meskoob, *Iranian Nationality*, 191.
35 Ibid., 156–157.
36 Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 6.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 21.
39 Ibid., 29.
40 Ibid., 58.
41 Ibid., ix.
42 Ibid., 103.

43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 299.
45 Ibid., 261.
46 Ibid., 242.
47 Etienne Balibar, "The Nation Form: History and Ideology," in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1984), 86.