



## A revolution in rhyme: poetic co-option under the Islamic Republic

by Fatemeh Shams, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, xvi + 371 pp., \$85, ISBN 9780198858829

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## BOOK REVIEW

**A revolution in rhyme: poetic co-option under the Islamic Republic**, by  
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Poetry and politics are so deeply intertwined in Iran that understanding one is incomplete without understanding the other. While a significant volume of scholarship has examined censorship and literary techniques of the Iranian dissident poets (e.g. Karimi Hakkak's *A Fire of Lilies*), very few works have studied the conformist poets. *A Revolution in Rhyme* focuses on the interaction of poetry and politics in post-1979 Iran and, more particularly, on the 'Islamic Republican poetry', 'a branch of governmental literature (*adabiyāt-e hokūmati*) which implies certain stylistic and thematic features, as well as moral and/or financial sponsorship by the government that came to power following the 1979 revolution' (15–16). The volume starts and ends with two *qasidehs*, one by Azarm in 1964 and the other by Amiri-Esfandaqeh in 2009, and argues that poetry remains at the core of socio-political life in moments of political crisis in Iran. The introduction recounts the story of Azarm's *qasideh* in praise of Khomeini, and the poet's fate after the man he praised rose to power. This is followed by seven chapters, a bibliography, and an index. This volume appeals to scholars of sociology, history, political science, and literary theory.

Scholarship has discounted Islamic Republican poetry for 'its allegedly poor literary merit' and has considered it as having little worth beyond 'its place as propaganda' (17). Shams identifies a 'literary snobbery' among such scholars for whom 'poetry can only be calibrated by its aesthetic quality and not its socio-political impact' (21). She argues that 'this common blind spot' supports the Islamic Republic's mission and hides 'the inextricable link between poetry and politics in Iran' (22). The introduction provides a strong justification for studying not only the state-sponsored *poetry* but also any cultural product that might be considered 'Islamic Republican'.

Chapter One introduces two generations of Islamic Republican poets; enumerates the reason for their inclusion in the state-sponsored canon of poetry; and compares and contrasts them. Avesta (known as the founder of Islamic revolution poetry), Sabzevari, Moallem, Garmarudi, and Saffarzadeh belong to the first generation and Hoseini, Aminpur, Harati, Abdolmalekian, Qazveh, and Amiri-Esfandaqeh to the second. Although such poets share an affinity with the governing power, they are far from a homogenous group, and each is an individual figure with their own particular relationship to the state. The next chapter delves into the history of one of the most influential cultural organizations of the Islamic Republic, the Center of the Arts of the Organization for Islamic Propaganda (*Howzeh-ye honari-ye sāzmān-e tablighāt-e Islāmi*). While the impact of *Howzeh* on film (Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, vol. 4) and music (Nahid Siamdoust, *Soundtrack of the Revolution: The Politics of Music in Iran*) has been investigated, its role in shaping Persian poetry has not. Shams tells the story of *Howzeh's* development from a grassroots organization to the main centre of state-controlled cultural production and into a giant bureaucratic institution, famous for its surfeit of civil servants and reduced cultural output, that works side by side with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to keep literary censorship in place.

Dealing with the 'poetic co-option' as the key concept of the book, Chapters Three to Five investigate 'a complex set of socio-political poetic endeavors in response to the nation's

upheavals' (29). Chapter Three focuses on the Islamic Republican poets' employment of 'The Village' (*rūstā*) as a symbol of the desire to return to the self, itself popularized through Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi*. This chapter provides a survey of 'The Village' in the history of Persian literature, leading to it symbolizing 'a quasi-spiritual sanctified space' (121). The next chapter delves into the rise of 'the mystic-militant poetic lexicon' during the gruelling Iran-Iraq war (29). Here, Shams studies poems by Abdolmalekian and Aminpur as well as poems sung by Ahangaran and mentions his role in the popularity of such songs and in recruiting soldiers for the war. Such poetry makes extensive use of the core Shi'ite belief regarding the 'Āshūrā. Employing psychoanalytical theories related to trauma, Chapter Five highlights a less prevalent subgenre that exists alongside the mystic-militant lexicon of official poetry, i.e. the official poets' more realistic picture of the war. As Shams shows, even in such depictions by the official poets, including Aminpur and Abdolmalekian, 'war still remains a legitimate cause with moral ambiguities attached to it' (205). Chapter Six reveals the ways in which elegy (*marsiyeḥ*) was revived in the poetry of the post-war period upon the death of Khomeini in 1989. This chapter studies poetry by Aminpur and Hoseini as well as various stages of Aminpur's evolving war poetics.

The final chapter studies Khamenei's annual poetry ceremonies. These were initially held as private poetry meetings, though their scope widened steadily until reaching the live broadcasting of televised ceremonies. Here, Shams argues that such a carefully orchestrated official ceremony held in the leader's presence represents 'the construction of a new political covenant (bey'at-e siāsi)' (297) and highlights his authority over three realms: political, religious, and cultural (301). The reasons behind Khamenei's interest in Saeb are explained, and his attempt to 'perform the role of a legitimate ruler and literary critic with a deep passion for Persian poetry' is elaborated on (301).

This monograph does not represent the 1979 Revolution as a rapture in Persian poetry, rather it sees the continuity; Shams demonstrates that Islamic Republican poetry was in fact in the making decades before the Revolution. An example is the mystical lexicon and motifs, later used in war poetry, in which initial interest emerged in the lead-up to the Revolution among poets who were sympathetic to the guerrilla poetic trend of the 1970s as well as in the adaption of certain mystical concepts by Khomeini, Shariati, and Motahhari. In its study of war poetry, this monograph remains focused on official poets alone. For an understanding of other (official) poets who wrote on the same subject one can refer to Seyed-Gohrab's *Martyrdom, Mysticism and Dissent*. Shams' brief discussion of *khudi/gheir-e khudi* poets is illuminating; the political safety that official poets enjoyed saved them from accusations of being 'anti-war', while the members of the Writers' Association of Iran who wrote with an equally objective approach were treated differently. Shams and Seyed-Gohrab have started the serious study of official poets and paved the way for scholars aiming to further investigate the enigmatic relationship between the Islamic Republic and the conformist poets who align with its ideological apparatus.

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