Outline of the Book

This book focusses on depictions of the 1979 Revolution and Iran-Iraq War in Persian poetry, and how the Persian poetic tradition was used to feed politics, to spur people to action, to express the ideology of the Islamic Republic, and also in opposition, to assert the human and individual nature of experience. It does not claim to be comprehensive regarding either the state-sponsored poets or the responses from oppositional and diasporic poets. It aims to reveal enough about the ways poets and both classical and contemporary poetry functioned in the first decades of the Revolution to encourage other scholars to launch investigations on this fascinating topic.

There are several leitmotifs in this book, the most important being martyrdom, which is part and parcel of Persian culture. While there are ample martyrological paradigms in Shiite Islam, Persian secular culture also has its narrative of martyrdom. One example is Prince Siyāvash, a pre-Islamic hero, whose death is interpreted as martyrdom. Siyāvash is admired for his faithfulness, innocence and altruism. His problems start when his stepmother, Südāba, is attracted to him, but Siyāvash rejects her sexual advances. She accuses him of sexual transgression, which forces Siyāvash to prove his innocence by riding through fire, a Zoroastrian tradition. Siyāvash leaves Persia and chooses exile in Turan, the arch-enemy of Persia. He is first hospitably received by Persia’s arch-enemy, Afrāsiyāb, but after a series of events Siyāvash is killed.¹

The notion of martyrdom is also used in metaphors. One recurrent metaphor is the moth and the candle flame. In several interpretations, the moth stands for the lover who is ready to offer his soul to be united with the fire. The fire is the light, a window on the world of non-existence, where the lover lives with the beloved forever. Such a death is the ultimate way of showing one’s devotion and dedication. As we will see in this book, many Iranian soldiers compared themselves to moths running towards the enemy’s fire. Some poets even state that the candle itself is a lover as it is gradually burning up while giving light to others. It gives up its substance, made of beeswax, because that has been separated from its essence, the honey.

As poetry has been a national icon of Iran and is still a marker of identity for Iranians, the first chapter investigates how poetry is related to politics, and why it is so essential for Iranians in voicing their ideas. The introductory chapter is devoted to the role of poetry, specifically the relationship between it and politics.


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The aesthetic aspect of poetry relating to politics is also considered, as much of Persian poetry has been written in the service of politics and could be characterised as aesthetised politics. After this theoretical framework, the role of poetry in forming a new revolutionary culture is addressed by delving into a wide range of sources upholding the ideals of the 1979 Revolution, severely condemning the “Western cultural invasion” and secular Iranian movements, and introducing new Islamist conventions of literature. Committed revolutionaries chiefly treated topics such as martyrdom, militant engagement against the West and foregrounding a politically laden Shiism and a poetic mysticism with much common ground with Sufism. The new revolutionary literati fiercely reacted against the pre-revolutionary poets and intellectuals, depicting them as pawns of the Western powers who aimed to weaken traditional Persian Islamic culture by stimulating people to drink alcohol and to adopt Western manners, and reducing women to sex objects. The chapter concludes with an analysis of what is widely regarded as an ideal revolutionary poem, in which resistance, martyrdom, the justification of violence and classical themes such as love and wine are integrated in a vehemently political context.

Chapter Two offers an analysis of the dynamics of martyrdom and how the Islamic government utilised poetry to make death meaningful, so justifying violence and a loss of life. The cultivation of martyrdom is a pillar of Shiism, but during the 1979 Revolution and especially during the war against Iraq (1980–1988), martyrdom became an ideological pillar of the Islamic Republic. This chapter addresses its roots in classical Persian culture by focusing on the lover’s spiritual death in medieval Persian love poetry and why an ideal lover was expected to sacrifice everything to attain union with the beloved. Why is union with the spiritual beloved depicted in terms of annihilation, or literally “offering one’s head”? These themes are interwoven with the paradigmatic story of the third Shiite Imam, Ḥuseyn, who was killed in the city of Karbala in present-day Iraq and is known as the “prince of martyrs.” Shiites were politically quietist for much of their long history. Enduring suffering was regarded as a mark of piety. The situation changed in the 1960s as Shiites in the Persian cultural sphere increasingly engaged with politics, interpreting Ḥuseyn’s death as a paradigm for fighting contemporary political injustice. ‘Ali Shari’ati (1933–1977) and Ruḥullāh Khomeini (1902–1989) were among the most influential Iranian intellectuals in popularising political Shiism. Their concept of activist martyrdom was central to the 1979 Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war. Following this discussion, the chapter examines several poems that praise martyrdom, inviting people to offer their lives. The analysis highlights the integration of mystical themes, such as the spiritual stages on the mystic path and the prophet’s ascension, in order to contextualise death as a step – indeed, a leap – forward on the mystic path, leading
to union with the immaterial beloved. What is fascinating in these poems is the polyphonic use of themes and motifs and how pre-Islamic Persian history is combined with the Shiite tradition and Sufism to produce a new poem that is both familiar to the audience and effective in mobilising people for the front. While many of these poems have a high literary value, they were composed as propaganda. Their message is that dying in a just cause is essential for personal growth. Such a death also had a social impact, as the families of the fallen were congratulated rather than receiving condolences. The Islamic government offered a wide range of privileges for family members.

Chapter Three focuses on Qeysar Aminpūr (1959–2007), an influential poet of the Iran-Iraq War who started his career as a committed revolutionary poet, writing many poems on war and martyrdom, but later adopted a more apolitical stance. Aminpūr receives a chapter to himself because he has written on virtually every aspect of the Iran-Iraq War, using both classical and modern poetic forms, and his poetry is very well received in Iran. His poetry is a balanced example of the development of Persian poetry in a period in which bullets, missiles and aircraft became part of the poetic universe. It gives tangible depictions of the horrors of war and the suffering of innocent people. Several of his poems, notably “A Poem about War,” are still used to commemorate the war. Concentrating on one poet offers us insights into the poet’s intellectual and political development. In Aminpūr’s case, we see that after the war he composed poems on peace, showing the war’s irreparable impact and traumas. This chapter also discusses the choices the poet made in selecting the poems in his collected volume of poetry. It is fascinating to see why he removed some published poems from the collection. Are his choices personal or politically motivated? In a country such as Iran, where ideology and political developments are central, it is essential to see what is excluded when analysing a poet’s political stance. Aminpūr is an excellent example of how committed revolutionary poets altered their political stance.

Chapter Four delineates the notion of love in Iran-Iraq War poetry. This notion is ubiquitous in the war setting, referring to a wide range of realities, all intended to motivate soldiers to fight and achieve their final goal, i.e., to die as lover martyrs. Poets rely heavily on classical Persian poetry and Islamic mysticism to define love, its working and impact. Soldiers are depicted as lovers or mystics, and the front line as a mystic itinerary leading to the divine. The front line is also depicted as an academy of love, Khomeini as the teacher, and the soldiers as students. The chapter addresses whether the definitions of love as an active agent that kills the lover and the beloved in classical Persian love poetry have contributed to the inclusion of love in a militant and violent modern war context. In medieval depictions of love, the lover is advised to aban-
don the rational faculty and to focus on the heart in order fully to engage with
spiritual illumination. Beheading is used as a metaphor for bidding farewell to
reason to concentrate on the heart, while in modern war contexts the metaphor
becomes the reality. The discussion contributes to our understanding of the ap-
plication of these medieval mystical concepts in a militant modern setting and
how peaceful metaphors of love are transformed into a violent reality.

The 1979 Revolution began a new chapter in Iranian history. The revolution-
ary intellectuals wanted to create a new human being, cleansing universities and
other public teaching organisations of pre-revolutionary “elements” during what
they called “the cultural revolution.” Textbooks at all levels were changed to in-
stil the new ideology into students. Chapter Five is devoted to part of this ide-
ological engagement, communicated to children through committed revolutionary
poetry. It analyses one collection of poetry for children. All the poems are com-
posed from the perspective of a child, dealing with the themes of martyrdom,
heroism, experiences of war and the basij-soldiers. The themes and perspectives
in this collection make it a good example of the type of poems written for chil-
dren. Such collections are intended to inculcate in children how to cope with the
war’s traumatic experiences and how they themselves can become revolutionar-
ies, ready to sacrifice life itself for the Revolution. The chapter examines how
such poems make a connection between martyrs and angels, for example by
showing how angels take the martyrs to an eternal world, as promised in the
Quran. This use and abuse of the aesthetic power of poetry has not been studied
before.

Chapter Six is devoted to the poetry of Simin Bihbahānī (1927–2014), a lead-
ing established poet who also courageously voiced her concerns about a wide
range of vital human rights issues violated by the Islamic Republic after the
1979 Revolution. Never allied herself with the revolutionary camp, Bihbahānī
is perhaps the most productive established female poet who wrote on the Revo-
lution and the war. Her poetry lifts events to a higher plane, depicting them from
a humanistic perspective, aloof from Islamic ideological colouring. The chapter
outlines crucial events such as “Black Friday,” which became the turning point
of the 1979 Revolution, the anti-war mood in Iran, her interpretation of martyr-
dom, her poems on the liberation of the oil city Khurramshahr from the Iraqis,
and her war poem “Once more, I will build you, my homeland,” which has be-
come a national poem in post-war Iran, sung by several pop singers from Los
Angeles to Tehran. The chapter offers a different perception of the Revolution
and the war, appraising from a secular viewpoint the same subjects that were
addressed by revolutionary poets.

Chapter Seven analyses the poetry of a central diasporic Persian poet, Nādir
Nādirpūr (1929–2000), who fled Iran after the Revolution and lived first in Eu-
rope and then in Los Angeles until his passing. After 1979 many Iranian intellectuals chose exile, where they continued to write on political events in Iran. Nādirpūr is a pre-eminent example of the intellectuals in exile. The chapter examines several key poems in which the poet, as an exile, assesses the events in his home country, using a catalogue of pre-Islamic myths and legends to depict current political developments. The chapter offers a new perspective on the Revolution and the war from a frustrated and infuriated poet whose hopes of returning home have been shattered. He is stunned at the way his fellow Iranians could discover Khomeini’s image miraculously visible in the moon, or how they were responding to their discovery of Khomeini as a poet of mystic love and wine. It is in such a state of bewilderment that the poet compares Khomeini to mythical characters in the Persian national epic Shāh-nāma by Firdowsī (circa 935–1020). The chapter offers insights into the ways a secular poet of the diaspora voiced his view on the Revolution and war. He is exceptionally critical of the Islamic regime, its founder and the recent course of Iranian history.

Chapter Eight examines Iran’s international relations during the Iran-Iraq War, demonstrating how the majority of the Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, wholeheartedly supported Saddam Hussein (1937–2006) in his fight against Iran. It investigates the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia on several grounds, such as the rivalry between the Persians and the Arabs, Iranian resentment of the Saudis’ support for Saddam, and the divergence of religious affiliations and practices: while Iran relies on her Shiite and Sufi tradition, the Saudis base their politics on Salafism and Wahhabism, which are diametrically opposed to Iranian religiosity. The chapter gives medieval examples showing how the Persians and Arabs have challenged each other in verse, each claiming the more praiseworthy qualities. The rivalry is not based on ethnicity alone, but also on piety. The chapter offers examples from Khomeini’s poetry in which he emphasises that piety is not achieved simply by a pilgrimage (ḥajj) to the House of God, because the believer’s heart is God’s actual residence. The heart is more important than the Ka’ba in Mecca. Such views contradict the Wahhabi ideology, highlighting a completely different appreciation of the pilgrimage. The chapter examines why revolutionary Iranians demonstrated in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, provoking the Saudis’ anger in the 1980s. The chapter analyses several poems composed in reaction to the violent responses of the Saudi police to Iranian demonstrators, who were injured and even killed. In sum, the chapter offers new insights into the dynamics of the opposing ideologies, displaying how much Iranian Shiism and Persian Sufism differ from the Wahhabi ideology, and how these ideological incongruities impact deeply on the international relations between the two countries.
The Conclusion, Chapter Nine, is devoted to an analysis of the use of poetry in modern politics, examining how the revolutionary intellectuals created a new version of Sufism in which love-death, martyrdom and a new type of piety were central. The chapter examines the role of poetry as a mobilising force, but also as a therapeutic medium, used to heal traumas. The chapter also asks whether the revolutionaries’ new poetic norms and conventions were successful. How do Iranians appreciate the committed war poetry? Why have several of the revolutionary intellectuals become dissidents?