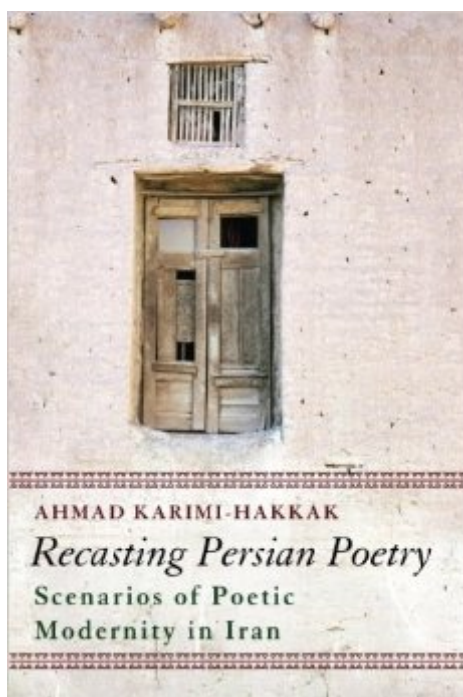# Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios Of Poetic Modernity In Iran

Synopsis

Using a semiotic model of poetic change, Recasting Persian Poetry presents a critical history of the evolution of Persian poetry in modern Iran. Iran's contact with Europe in the nineteenth century produced largely imaginary ideas about European culture and literature. In a series of textual manoeuvres and cultural contestations, successive generations of Iranian intellectuals sought to recast the classical tradition in a mold at once modern and relevant to their concerns. In particular, Karimi proposes a revision of the view that sets the Modernist poet Nima Yushij as the single-handed inventor of 'New Poetry'. This view, he argues, has resulted in an exaggerated sense of the aesthetic gulf between the modernist poetry of Iran and classical Persian poetry. Through a number of close readings of works by Nima's predecessors, Karimi makes visible a century-old Persian poetic tradition with Nima as its culmination.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this well-written and persuasively argued book, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak chronicles the development of Persian poetry in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Theoretically, Karimi-Hakkak draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical principle and Yuri Lotman's diachronic principle to show the process of change in Persian poetry. The beginning of this change is exemplified in an incident in the mid-nineteenth century at the court of Nasereddin Shah, where the reform-minded prime minister, Amir Kabir, chastises the poet Habibollah Qa'ani for "lying" in a panegyric qasida in honor of the prime minister. Amir Kabir, of course, saw poetry in general and

the type of poetry that had developed during the Qajar period as detrimental to "progress" and "modernization" in the Iranian society, which was in dire need of change. Such extraliterary concerns, Karimi-Hakkak explains, were expressed increasingly by others, such as Fath-'Ali Akhundzadeh, Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, and Mirza Malkom Khan, who also addressed a need for a change in Persian poetry in literary terms as well, always, however, linking it to social concerns. Given the social and political climate of Iran in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which led to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-1911, the idea of the necessity of a change in Persian poetry in a way that would reflect the realities of a country in transition was gradually becoming widespread and propagated by such notable literary figures as 'Ali Akbar Dehkhoda and Abolqasem 'Aref, who challenged the traditional system of Persian poetry in terms of introducing new content as well as experimentation with rhetorical, lexicosemantic, and structural aspects of poetry.

Recasting Persian Poetry maps the zone of transition between two relatively stable states of Persian literature, defined by the traditional and the modern systems of poetic signification. It is a diachronic study of poetic change which focuses on the hows and whereofs of literary reform over a period of one-hundred years: from the first signs of dissatisfaction with the classical canon in the mid- 19th c., to the 1960s, when modern poetry became influential enough to prescribe the literary standard. Karimi-Hakkak's book belongs to a very small body of works which pertain to this crucial time. Its greatest distinction is the consistent application of modern methodology (based on the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Yuri Lotman in particular) to poetry of a period either ignored by modernist critics, or used as a foil for she'r-e now, modern poetry proper. Chapter 1 traces the pedigree of the modernist movement to the essayistic prose of the 19th c. intellectuals Akhundzade, Aqa-Khan Kermani, and Malkom-Khan, who were among the first to call for socially relevant literature, for European-style criticism, and for the preposderance of substance over poetic artifice--perrenial issues of the modernist discourse. The author examines their aspirations to an idealized and as yet rather vague "progressive European standard," and their subversion of the classical ideal through stereotyping and negating the literary practices of the Return movement. Chapter 2 examines two landmark sub-genres of the Constitutional period: the "democratic qasida" (Dehkhoda's "Yad ar...," 1909) and the "political ghazal" ('Aref Qazvini's "Payam-e azadi," 1911). Conventional criticism singles thematic innovation as their only distinctive feature.

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