



Persian Literary Studies Journal (PLSJ)

Vol. 7, No. 11, 2018

ISSN: 2322-2557

DOI: 10.22099/JPS.2018.5662, pp. 101-103

Rahimi, Babak. *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals, 1590- 1641 CE*. Brill. Leiden, 2012.

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Babak Rahimi in *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran* tries to study how the Althusserian “ideological state apparatus” operates or rather fails to do so in the Safavid Empire. Thus, taking a Foucauldian approach towards power relations in the era, the author has tried to show both the way power is manipulated by the authorities and how, paradoxically, it germinates resistance. Though not acknowledged, the book draws mainly on the New Historicist and Cultural Materialist reading strategies to accomplish its purpose. Thus, by providing both authorial and grassroots narratives, the book, in successive chapters, starts from the center and moves towards the periphery to display how power relations are deconstructed.

Besides focusing on resistance/subversion as the least common denominator of many post-structuralists, the book centers also around two other formative ideas, i.e. Geertz’s notion of culture as text and Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. Following Roland Barth, Geertz, and many other structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers, Rahimi considers culture and cultural practice as text. Thus, his book makes utmost use of “reading”-- in its various forms of close, ‘thick’, and deconstructive readings-- in dealing with all the social and cultural phenomena to excavate their meanings/significances. Accordingly, the book identifies three key elements of reader, author and the text to interpret cultural texts.

To Rahimi, the most significant text in the Safavid era is Meydane-Naghshe-Jahan and the public events, which took place in it. The book first regards the Meydan as an architectural text and then turns to it as a public space. To Rahimi, the architectural structure of Meydane-Naghshe-Jahan operates as a stage of theatre on/in which the drama of Safavid power is performed. According to his usual practice in the book, Rahimi in chapter three first provides a detailed close reading of the particular spatial text of the Meydan and tries to find out its authorial “meaning”. This chapter is a brilliant reading practice to unveil the intention of the Safavid rulers behind the particular architecture of the square i.e. a highly raised stage on which the king is represented as the main player and the people as the audience are invited to watch him and his power. However, Rahimi is keen enough to not finalize his reading with the reader as the passive receiver of the text. Therefore, with the reader/audience as a powerful element in creating meaning, he brings in his second level of reading of text of Meydan focusing on those aspects of the Meydan, which subvert the authorial meaning. Hence, based on cultural materialist views coupled with Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, turns the reading towards coffeehouses in the Meydan where subversive voices resist the authorial ideology of the Safavid state.

After applying close reading to the architectural text of the Meydan, the book takes a new direction and focuses on the audience not as passive readers of the authorial text but as active agents who actively read their own meaning into the text of Meydan. Rahimi, from the beginning of the book, introduces public sphere as one of the key signposts of his argument. However, he questions the basis of Habermas’ “public sphere” which is based on elitist, rational arguments to achieve the common good and bridge the gap between the society and the state. Rejecting the idea that there is only one kind of Eurocentric public sphere, he points to various public spheres in Eurasia, which had been established through alternative social interactions. Accordingly, Meydan-e-Naghshe-Jahan is considered a public space nurturing a public sphere through which alternative, non-state emotions and ideas are expressed on the grassroots level. To Rahimi, Muharram rituals in Safavid era was a significant public sphere created in the Meydan providing a great opportunity for common people to resist the dominant ideology.

The book elaborates this semi-theoretical proposition, mostly by turning to the New Historicist technique of “thick reading”. To do so, he chooses an anecdote- the story related by an Italian tourist about a man who buries himself in a ditch to swindle people -- and tries to discover a counter-narrative against the authorial, royal narrative of Muharram in the era. However, Rahimi falls short of a persuasive argument to accomplish his theoretical claims. In accordance with the same procedure, Rahimi focuses on another text-- this time a literary text-- to unveil the emergence of new counter-discourses resisting the dominant safavid discourse. Although Rahimi’s analysis of Kashifi’s *Rouzeh* is a brilliant critical analysis of a literary text, it has very little to do with his theoretical framework offered in the first two chapters, i.e. public sphere, carnivalesque, and resistance against the authorial narrative.

However, reading *Theatre State and the Formation of Early Modern Public Sphere in Iran: Studies on Safavid Muharram Rituals* can be a great, joyful, rewarding experience for those who are interested in the history of the Safavid era. Rahimi provides fantastic, detailed information about the era through a wonderfully rich knowledge of the research done in this area. All through the book, the reader is given detailed information about myriad of books, articles, travelogue, etc. – published or unpublished-- written in various languages on the Safavid era around the world. Skipping the first two chapters will not damage the pleasure of reading the book, as Rahimi himself suggests, if the reader is familiar with ideas of Foucault and Bakhtin.