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Book Review



[Āshnāyān-e Gharīb: Jostārhāyī dar Farhang va Adab-e Fārsī; Distant Friends: Inquiry into Persian Culture and Literature], by Manijeh Abdollahi. Tehran: Moʿin, 1404/2025. 223 pp.

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This collection of sixteen essays introduces and discusses subjects that have received relatively little attention in mainstream literary scholarship. Earlier versions of some essays appeared in the magazine Asr-e Panjshanbeh in a column entitled "Clandestine Reading." The volume ranges widely: time in frame narratives, the wiles of women, Tārīkh al-Vozarā, Dastūr al-Kātib fī Taʿyīn al-Marātib, utopias and dystopias, war culture, the marvelous, travel narratives, the Constitutional Revolution in Shiraz, a celebration attended by enslaved Africans in Shiraz, Saʿdi's poetry and storytelling, and several aspects of the history of Persian medicine.

Abdollahi's language reveals an intimate knowledge of classical Persian literature. The book may nevertheless appeal more immediately to academically informed readers than to general readers, for some words, expressions, and allusions are demanding, notwithstanding the helpful explanatory footnotes. In her introduction, Abdollahi invites us to revisit texts and topics often overshadowed by the canonical masters of Persian literature. She describes her essays not as conventional academic studies but as intimate and playful explorations of less frequently read works. Readers need not agree with every interpretation; they are encouraged instead to approach familiar and unfamiliar material from a fresh perspective. Each chapter generally begins with background

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information before moving into the texts and their wider connections.

The opening chapter, "The Playful Role of Time in Frame Narratives," examines the relationship between time and storytelling in One Thousand and One Nights, Sandbād-nāmeh, and Bakhtiyār-nāmeh. Abdollahi argues that time plays a dual role, particularly in Shahrazad's predicament: she prolongs her stories to survive another night, while simultaneously hoping that Shahriyar will be transformed quickly enough for the ordeal to end. Her narration must make the hours pass, yet she wishes for the entire process to be over.

Another chapter considers the literary tradition surrounding the "wiles of women," with particular attention to Sandbād-nāmeh. Abdollahi places such writings within a largely masculine pedagogical culture. In Qābūs-nāmeh and related works, the frequent address "O son" (ey pesar) suggests that adolescent boys and young men, whether from prosperous families or the aristocracy, were the intended recipients of instruction about social life. Comparable texts explicitly addressed to girls are conspicuously absent, whereas misogynistic depictions of women recur across poetry, narrative, folklore, and conduct literature. Abdollahi reads these works against the background of a society structured by masculine authority and the precarious position of women within it.

"A Book for All Seasons" discusses Dastūr al-Kātib fī Taʿyīn al-Marātib by Moḥammad b. Hindūshāh Nakhjavānī, a fourteenth-century (eighth-century AH) administrative compendium concerned with official correspondence, decrees, and matters of government. Nakhjavānī was deeply familiar with administrative practice, and his father, Hindūshāh, had also written on political and historical questions. Abdollahi interprets the proliferation of such works in the Ilkhanid period as part of an effort to imagine political order through the legacy of pre-Islamic Iran. She draws attention to their invocations of Iranian frontiers, kingship, and Sasanian political models, and to the large number of sample letters and decrees in Nakhjavānī's work. One memorable detail concerns the recommended odd, rather than even, number of pen cases (p. 55).

The fifth chapter turns to a Persian encyclopedia, Shams al-Dīn Moḥammad b. Maḥmūd Āmolī's Nafāʾis al-Funūn fī ʿArāʾis al-ʿUyūn, composed in the fourteenth century. Abdollahi reflects on the preservation and movement of learned traditions in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions and the importance of Fars and Shiraz as intellectual refuges. The encyclopedia ranges from practical questions such as the preparation of writing implements to government, philosophy, and religion. Extended quotations and footnotes help convey its breadth. Particularly engaging is the discussion of ideal and undesirable forms of political community, including the "city of free men" (madīna-ye aḥrār).

Another memorable chapter is devoted to Mobārak Shāh Fakhr-e Modabber's Ādāb al-Ḥarb va al-Shajāʿa, a work on warfare that also reveals its author's preference for peace. Its account of weapons, martial practices, and military knowledge is at once practical and figurative. The work, Abdollahi argues, could function as a guide for rulers and commanders. The reviewer's attention is drawn particularly to the imaginative language through which the author describes bows, arrows, and arrowheads (p. 83).

Chapter eight, "Escape from Kāshān's Fīn Bath," considers the pilgrimage account of Amīn al-Dawlah, a late-Qajar reformist

minister. The title recalls the fate of Amir Kabir at the Fīn Bath and evokes the political dangers faced by dismissed ministers. Abdollahi finds in the travel account an early preference for plain prose, possibly reinforced by the author's familiarity with French. Especially striking is his description of the slave market in Mecca, including the story of a woman sold into slavery because of courtly jealousy.

The ninth chapter explores the fortunes of constitutionalism in Shiraz through Tohfe-ye Nayyer [Nayyer's Gift], by Shaykh ʿAbd al-Rasūl Nayyer. Abdollahi admires the author's accessible style and lively narration, which complicate any simple account of modern Persian prose as merely an imitation of translated European fiction. She quotes passages on the Constitutional Revolution in Fars, the influenza epidemic in Shiraz, and a devastating famine in Khafr. These accounts are moving reminders of the social experience that may be preserved in writings outside the established literary canon.

A further chapter is devoted to a long poem by Shūrīdeh Shirazi describing a feast in Moshir al-Molk's garden attended by enslaved Black people in Shiraz. Abdollahi first surveys the representation of Black people in classical Persian literature and then examines the poem's distinctive vocabulary, including its attempts to reproduce the speech attributed to those represented. She also notes the naming conventions found in the poem: flower names, such as jasmine, lily, thyme, and violet, for women, and names drawn from precious stones, such as diamond and ruby, for men. The chapter opens a window onto the history of language, race, and social hierarchy.

The following two chapters discuss Saʿdi: one examines the celebrated verses beginning Banī Ādam, and the other considers his narrative techniques. Both are well written. Yet there is a tension between their inclusion and the book's stated aim of retrieving writers and texts that have received relatively little attention. Saʿdi stands at the center of the Persian literary canon. In a future edition, Abdollahi might consider whether one or both chapters could make room for less familiar authors or works.

The final four chapters turn to Persian medicine. One surveys medicine in mythology and early historical writings and introduces Akhavaynī Bokhārī's Hedāyat al-Motaʿallemīn fī al-Ṭebb, among the earliest surviving medical treatises in Persian. Another explores conceptions of mental illness and forms of treatment in premodern Persian medical culture. A further essay investigates the intriguing idea of a small, narrow book portable enough to be concealed in a boot while traveling or on campaign. The final chapter asks whether traditional Persian medicine should be understood in terms of science or superstition.

Āshnāyān-e Gharīb is a book to read, reread, and think about. Its most distinctive quality lies in Abdollahi's capacity to make seemingly marginal details newly suggestive: matters that readers may have overlooked in familiar literary histories become invitations to reconsider Persian cultural and textual traditions. Even where one might question an interpretation or the selection of materials, the volume succeeds in prompting fresh curiosity about works that deserve a wider readership.