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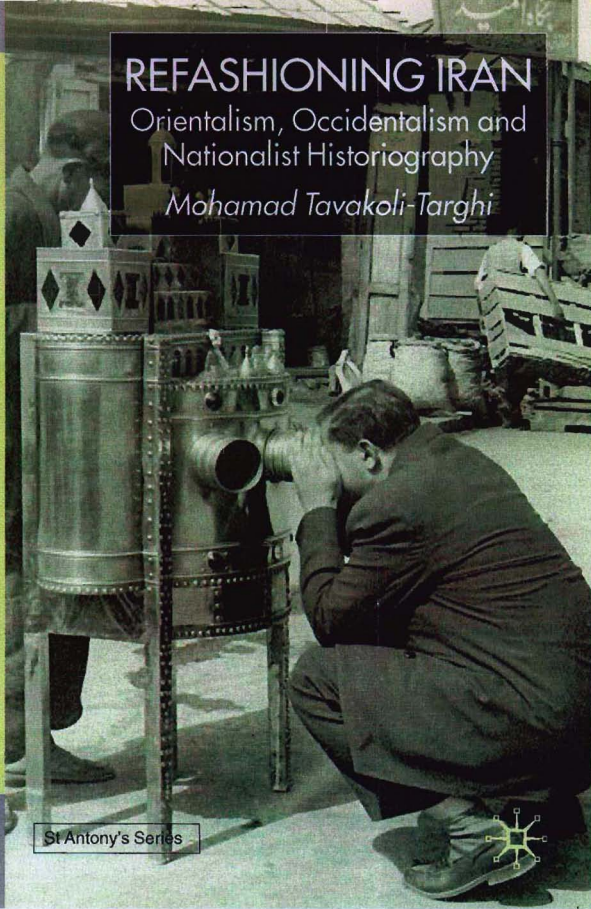
REFASHIONING IRAN

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi

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Orientalism, Occidentalism and
Nationalist Historiography

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St Antony's Series



Refashioning Iran

Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography

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For Jennifer, Azadeh, and Afsaneh

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Refashioning Iran is the product of an intellectual journey that began with the Iranian Revolution of 1979 but which then detoured into an exploration of modernity, Orientalism, nationalism, and the writing of history. Dissatisfied with the conventional accounts of the Revolution and my own dissertation on the subject, I began to explore the making of modern Iranian identity. An initial inquiry into the narrative identity of the nineteenth century led me back to a set of Iran-centered *dasatiri* texts (named after *Dasatir*, a collection of writings attributed to ancient Iranian sages) that were produced by an exile community of Zoroastrian scholars who had settled in India in the late sixteenth century. These *dasatiri* texts, which were popularized by the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Orientalists, intensified my curiosity about the formation of Orientalism and “Oriental studies” in India. The inquiry into the works of early Orientalists, conversely, interested me in Persianate scholars who had informed and educated these “pioneers.” Exploring the works of Persian scholars who collaborated with Orientalists, in turn, prompted my study of Persian travelogues on Europe. Exploring Persian travelogues, once again, I came full circle and found myself encountering the themes that informed the constitutionalist and revolutionary discourses in Iran.

As a byproduct of these intellectual detours and zigzags, *Refashioning Iran* is not a traditional historical monograph. Like episodes in the *Thousand and One Nights*, each chapter may stand on its own but it also shares the overarching concerns of the others. The issues explored in this book were once intended as two separate monographs; but the ticking of the academic clock and my self-deconstruction made such a project inexpedient. This was conveyed to me most forcefully by my colleagues, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, Fatema Keshavarz, Ahmet Karamustafa, and Jennifer Jenkins, who are to be credited for the completion of this book.

Refashioning Iran is an historiographical project that challenges the conventional national histories of Iran, which often depict modernity as an historical epoch inaugurated by “Westernizing” and state-centralizing reforms. By viewing modernity as a global process that engendered various strategies of self-refashioning, this study seeks to break away from the dehistoricizing implications of “Westernization” theories that are predicated upon the temporal assumption of the non-contemporaneity

of European and non-European societies. This assumption informs the hegemonic Iranian understanding of modern history since the early nineteenth century. In a recent expression of this dehistoricizing and detemporalizing presumption, Dariush Shayegan, a leading Iranian critic, inviting his readers to “to be rational for once” and claiming to “stay with the facts” argued, “For more than three centuries we, the heirs of the civilizations of Asia and Africa, have been ‘on holiday’ from history. We succeeded so well in crystallizing time in space that we were able to live outside time, arms folded, safe from interrogation.”¹ Informed by the same temporal assumption of non-simultaneity with Europe, Riza Davari, an Iranian philosopher who has set himself the task of transcending “Western” humanism, asserted that “the past of the West is our future.”²

The temporal comprehension of these *engagé* critics is genealogically related to the ironic and self-Orientalizing rhetorical argument of an early twentieth-century Constitutionalist who contended that if Adam, the forefather of humanity, could return today, he would be pleased with his Iranian descendants who have preserved his mode of life for many millenniums, whereas his unfaithful European children have totally altered Adam’s tradition and mode of life. With the exception of a short-lived ancient cultural efflorescence, this rhetorical argument was similar to the Hegelian postulate of the fundamental similarity of the ancient and contemporary Persian mode of life, a postulate which Hegel shared with his contemporary Orientalists. Such Hegelian and Orientalist temporal assumptions have been reinforced by Iranian historiographical traditions that equate modernity with Westernization.

Departing from these dehistoricizing traditions, I articulate an alternative understanding of modernity and nationalism. Here my focus is less on rationality and individualism and more on the simultaneity of a global process that contributed to the hybridization of cultures and the invention of national selves. Instead of confining Persianate modernity to the nation-state of Iran, this book explores the wider Persianate (Persian-writing) world, which is divided by area studies conventions into two autonomous cultural zones of South Asian India and Middle Eastern Iran. This allows for the discussion of the forgotten and what I have called *homeless texts* that have fallen between the cracks of area studies and nation-states of Iran and India, where Persian, despite its abrogation as the official language in 1830s, continued to serve as a *lingua franca* until the end of the nineteenth century. In this dialogic account, the revival of pre-Islamic history, stylistic and narratological developments in the Persian language, and the productive encounters

with the *heterotopic* communities of European settlers and travelers are explored in a pre-bordered historical setting when geographical lines separating Iran from India were not constituted as the “natural” divide of two divergent national characters, traditions, and cultures.

The first four chapters explore the interrelations of modernity, Orientalism, and Eur(ope)ology – a body of knowledge about Europe that has been hailed as “invisible Occidentalism” by the historian Juan Cole and as “Orientalism in reverse” by political scientist Mehrzad Boroujerdi.³ The remaining three chapters explicate the emergence of an Iran-centered historiography and a constitutionalist discourse that was facilitated through a “secondary identification” with the Iranian homeland (*vatan*).⁴ Identification with Iran, as a maternal homeland (*madar-i vatan*), provided the foundation for the making of modern nationalist subjects and subjectivities in Iran.

Informed by recent scholarship, Chapter 1 evaluates the conventional accounts of modernity as a byproduct of “Occidental rationalism” and offers an alternative approach for the exploration of Persianate modernity. This chapter was originally prepared for a St Antony’s conference on “The Coming of Modernity in Qajar Iran,” the proceedings of which were published in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* (1998). A later version of it also appeared in *Cultural Dynamics* (2001). The completion of this chapter was made possible by a 1998 Iranian Fellowship at St Antony’s College, Oxford. I am grateful for the support provided by the Middle East Centre and its faculty and staff, including Derek Hopwood, Eugene Rogan, Mustafa Badawi, Ahmed al-Shahi, Avi Shlaim, Elizabeth Anderson, and Mastaneh Ebtehaj who made my work at the Centre productive and pleasant. I am also grateful to John Gurney, Shahrzad and Reza Sheikholeslami, Julie Meisami, Farhan Nizami, John Piscatori, Colin Wakefield, Neguin Yavari, Wadad al-Kazi, Parviz Nieman, Mastaneh Ebtihaj, and Homa Katouzian who provided a supportive social and intellectual environment.

“Orientalism’s Genesis Amnesia” (Chapter 2) explores the institutional erasure of the labor of Persianate scholars who contributed to the making of Orientalism as an area of academic inquiry. Reexamining the intellectual career of Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) and Sir William Jones (1749–94), I interrogate an intellectual exchange that authorized European scholars but marginalized their Persianate associates. Exploring the intertextuality of European printed texts with forgotten Persian manuscripts, this chapter seeks to correct a current critical tendency that focuses solely on European scholarly productions without inquiring into the contribution of native scholars in the making of Oriental

studies. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* (1996). I am particularly thankful to Sucheta Mazumdar and Vasant Kaiwar, the editors of CSSAAME, for their support for my scholarship. The research for this chapter was made possible by a fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies (1992–3) and institutional affiliation with the Centre for Historical Studies of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. I particularly benefited from intellectual interaction with my gurus Harbans Mukhia and Muzaffar Alam. Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library (Patna, India) provided me with valuable sources. I am grateful for the generosity of Dr Abid Reza Bedar, the library's exceptionally efficient director. Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at a symposium on "Questions of Modernity," organized by the Department of Middle Eastern Studies and Anthropology, New York University, April 19–20, and the Rockefeller Humanities Institute on "South Asian Islam and the Greater Muslim World," sponsored by the Triangle South Asia Consortium Workshop, Chapel Hill, NC, May 23–26, 1996. This chapter benefited from the comments and critiques of conference participants including Lila Abu-Lughud, Talal Asad, Partha Chatterjee, Dipish Chakrabarty, Gyan Prakash, Michael Gilsanon, Khalid Fahmey, Stefania Pandolfo, Zachary Lockman, Timothy Mitchell, Faisal Devji, Gregory Kozlowski, Vali Nasr, David Lelyveld, Sandria Freitag, Barbra Metcalf, David Gilmartin, Tony Stewart, Vasant Kaiwar, Sucheta Mazumdar, Mariam Cook, Bruce Lawrence, and Carl Ernst. I am also appreciative of Alison Bailey's and Charlotte Brown's editorial suggestions for this and other chapters.

"Persianate Europology," Chapter 3, analyzes late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Persian accounts of Europe. Familiarity with Europe and European modes of life, I argue, facilitated the development of a "double consciousness" whereby Persianate ethical standards were used to evaluate European cultural practices and European perspectives were deployed for the censuring of Indian and Iranian societies. Earlier drafts of this chapter were presented in April and May 1997 respectively at the South Asia Seminar, the University of Chicago, and the Triangle South Asia Consortium Workshop at North Carolina State University. Participants at these two gatherings provided invaluable feedback and criticism. I am particularly indebted to Richard Eaton, Mushirul Hasan, Frank Korom, Claude Markovits, Omar Qureshi, Mohammed Kalam, Aisha Khan, Dipish Chakrabarty, and C. M. Naim who initially encouraged me to look beyond a nationalist frame of historical analysis. Tony Stewart, John Richards, Katherine Ewing, David Gilmartin, Bruce

Lawrence, and Carl Ernst, the organizers of the Triangle South Asia Consortium, provided an invaluable environment for intellectual dialogue in three consecutive years.

"Imagining European Women," Chapter 4, explores late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Persian travelers' impressions of European women. These travelers' reports of "self-experience" provided the narrative basis for instituting Europe as a new significant cultural Other. Positive accounts of European women informed the nationalist call for unveiling and educating women in Iran. Negative accounts, on the other hand, prompted the formation of a Europhobic discourse that warned against the Europeanization of Iranian women. The earliest version of this chapter was prepared for the 1990 "Round-Table on Identity Politics and Women," which was organized by Valentine Moghadam and sponsored by the World Institute for Development Economics Research at the United Nations University in Helsinki. Later versions were presented at a 1994 conference on Nineteenth-Century Persian Travel Memoirs at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas, Austin, and at a 1995 University of Virginia symposium on "Shifting Boundaries of Gender Categories in South Asia and the Middle East," which was sponsored by Middle East Studies Program, Women's Studies Program, and the Center for South Asian Studies. Having gone through many revisions and rethinking, this chapter has benefited from the critical readings of the organizers and participants in these conferences, including Valentine Moghadam, Farzaneh Milani, Richard Barnet, Elton L. Daniel, Abbas Amanat, Juan Cole, Amin Banani, M. R. Qanoonparvar, and Hafez Farnayan. This chapter, which came to shape much of my later scholarship, received invaluable support from Afsaneh Najmabadi and Lynne Withey of University of California Press, who offered me a book contract on the "Women of the West Imagined." Concerned with the use-value of this project in scapegoating Muslims and Iranians in the United States, I hesitantly abandoned it in mid-course. But the intellectual questions that this hesitation and change of heart posed for me contributed to the maturing of my historiographical perspective.

Chapter 5, "Contested Memories," explores the allegorical meanings of Iran's pre-Islamic history, a point of contention between Islamist and secular-nationalist visions of Iran. It explains that the meanings of pre-Islamic Iran are embedded in narratives that terminate in the Muslim conquest and death of the last Sasanian king in 651. In early Islamic historical writings, the termination of Sasanian rule signified the moral superiority of Islam. This was altered by a neo-Zoroastrian narrative that

was formulated by Azar Kayvan and his cohorts, who had migrated to India in the late sixteenth century. Popularized in the nineteenth century, this *dasatiri* account sought to displace the Qur'anic sacred history with an Iran-centered proto-nationalist history. The work on this chapter, like that of Chapter 2, was made possible with an American Institute of Indian Studies travel grant that enabled me to roam around Indian libraries and familiarize myself with Persian language texts written and printed in India. This chapter owes a great deal to Hossein Ziai, who offered a long and detailed criticism of an earlier draft. He made me aware of the political underpinnings of the temporal coding "pre-Islamic" and the scholarship on ancient Iran and Illuminationist (*Ishraq*) philosophy. I am also indebted to Sholeh Quinn, Alison Bailey, Charlotte Brown, Houchang Chehabi, and Afsaneh Najmabadi, who offered invaluable suggestions for revision. Earlier drafts of this chapter have appeared in *Iranian Studies* (Winter 1996) and *Medieval History Journal* (Winter 2000). I am thankful to Abbas Amanat and Harbans Mukhia, the editors of these journals, for their mentoring and intellectual support.

"Crafting National Identity," the sixth chapter, explores the emergence of a secular national identity in the nineteenth century. Informed by *dasatiri* texts, many nineteenth-century historians represented the pre-Islamic past as a "golden age," which come to a "tragic end" with the Muslim conquest. Linking the end of the "enlightened" pre-Islamic times to origins of human history, this representation made possible the crafting of a new memory, identity, and political reality. This invented past was used to project Iran's "decadence" onto Arabs and Islam and to introject desirable attributes of Europeans to the pre-Islamic Iranian Self. This chapter is a product of extensive dialogue with many friends and colleagues, including Afsaneh Najmabadi, Palmira Brummett, C. M. Naim, Catherine Hobbs, Khosrou Shakeri, Ahmad Karimi-Kakkak, as well as Houchang Chehabi and Abbas Amanat. An earlier draft of this chapter appeared in *Iranian Studies* (1990).

Chapter 7, "Patriotic and Matriotic Nationalism," explores two competing styles of national imagination. The official nationalism identified Iran as a "familial home" headed by the "crowned father" (*pidar-i tajdar*). This patriotic style was contested by a counter-official discourse that identified the "homeland" (*vatan*) as a dying mother in need of immediate care. In this matriotic style of nationalist imagination all Iranians were called upon to care for and to protect the motherland. In a close reading of Persian newspapers from the 1870s to the 1900s, I explain how the engendering of the national body as a mother symbolically

eliminated the father-Shah as the guardian of the nation. I also explore how this contributed to the emergence of popular sovereignty – the participation of “the nation’s children” (both male and female) in determining the future of the “mother-land” (*madar-i/mam-i vatan*). In developing this chapter, I have benefited from correspondences with Afsaneh Najmabadi and discussions with Jennifer Jenkins, Valentine Moghadam, Juan Cole, and Rebecca Saunders with whom I developed and taught a course on “Nations and Narration.” Earlier drafts of this chapter were presented at the South/West Asian Seminar Series at Illinois State University and at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies Lecture Series at the University of Chicago in 1997. It was also presented at a Social Science Research Council Project on “Nationalism After Colonialism,” Berkeley, November 1997. An earlier draft of this chapter has appeared in *Strategies* (November 2000) and can be viewed at <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals>.

The postscript explores the rhetoricality and theatricality of Iran’s modern constitutionalist discourse. It explains that maneuvers among alternative forms of Iranian-ness foregrounded Iranian identity, setting up the twentieth-century vacillations between secular and Islamic identities and cultural politics. The diverse range of issues addressed in this book inevitably raise more questions than I have been able to answer. Thus, this book should not be seen as a conclusive account of Iranian modernity and nationalism but as a preliminary reexamination of their fundamental assumptions.

The final production of this book was aided by the diligent and punctual editorial work of Valery Rose, to whom I am deeply grateful.

Notes on Romanization and Dates

This book utilizes a simplified version of the Library of Congress (LC) romanization system for Persian names and titles. Conventionally used by most on-line library catalogues, this system drops all defamiliarizing diacritical marks. Thus readers can conveniently locate the cited titles in on-line library catalogues. In a few self-evident cases, such as Tehran instead of Tihran, I have deviated from the LC convention.

For the period covered in this book, the lunar Hijri calendar was conventionally used in Persian sources. When necessary, I have supplied both Hijri and Gregorian dates.