

**Representing the Unpresentable: Historical Images
of National Reform from the Qajars
to the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Negar Mottahedeh

Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2008. 237 pages.

Negar Mottahedeh's book contains an important analysis of the relationship between Babism and modernity in Iran. The author argues that in order to understand "the historical conditions for Iranian perceptions of modernity" (p. 236), scholars need to break away from traditional disciplinary systems, just as Babism itself went against traditional understandings of Shi'ism in Iran. It is a complex, highly reflexive, and ambitious proposal. The book's detailed historical account of the emergence of the Bab and the critical lens through which the author analyzes the impact of Qurrat al-Ayn Tahirih's figure on the Iranian perceptions of the modern woman are bound to inspire any serious student of Iranian modernity. The figures of the Bab and Qurrat al-Ayn Tahirih are analyzed against the backdrop of the deeply ingrained

images of the *ta`ziyeh*, Fatimah, and Joseph, as well as Qur'anic images of Paradise and *houris* in Iranian culture. I have come away with a deeper understanding of the Iranian psyche and cultural attitudes toward modernity with their unfathomable embrace of traditional and religious motifs.

The book's underlying questions are "Why are modern acts, often articulated in terms of dress or veiling, associated with the dissent of the Babi? And why does this image of 'the Babi' appear as a dialectic of modernity, fluctuating between images of Western secularism and unveiling on the one hand, and as unrepresentable images of Shi'ite antiquity, on the other?" (p. 236). The reader does not get an answer addressing either the "why," identifying the causes for this phenomenon, or an ethnographic account of how modern Iranian society grapples with the antique elements of Shi'ite Islamic thought. Instead, the author sets out to map the influences of the *ta`ziyeh* on Iranian cultural modernity in an "anti-disciplinary" fashion – just as Babism should be understood in relation to Shi'ite thought infused with Iranian nationalism.

The reader is introduced to different and compelling approaches to the historiography of modern Iran in chapter 3: "Disciplining Babism." On page 130, Mottahedeh writes that "current scholarship dedicated to the study of Iranian modernity, of which Babism is a core component, must learn from its 'object,' so as not to re-erect the disciplinary and rhetorical 'veils' that have proven themselves ineffective over time." While applying this new and indeed innovative theory to the study of Babism, the author risks offering a new theoretical approach unsupported by a thorough and rigorous study of Iranian modernity.

The first chapter, "The Mutilated Body of the Modern Nation," is perhaps the book's best chapter, as it puts forth a novel proposal to study Babism as the "abject other" of Iranian modernity. The term "abject other" is borrowed from Julia Kristeva to show the image of the Babi as "the internal foreigner," "the nation's self as other," and as a result of a "failure to recognize kinship – kinship between selfhood and otherness" (p. 28). But there is a long list of other cultural theorists and even neurologists (p. 48) in this chapter who, in my opinion, lead to conceptual conflation and confusion. While Walter Benjamin's and Kristeva's theories and concepts are rightfully applied, no major theories are tested in the field of gender studies. As a result, the book lacks a critical concept of gender. Beyond interesting discussions about Qurrat al-Ayn Tahirih's presumed act of unveiling in the context of *ta`ziyeh* as the main model of historiography (pp. 135-38), gender as an analytical concept is missing.

The modern Iran that was formed against “the Babi,” which is defined as “an image of self as the embodiment of the nation’s ‘abject’ other” (p. 8), is born in the Qajar period and with minimum mention of the Pahlavi era; it is then traced in post-revolutionary Iran. The latter period can only be defined as “post” revolutionary in a strictly temporal sense, because for all intents and purposes the discussion concerning the cinema of the Islamic Republic of Iran considers it as still in the grip of revolutionary fervor.

[Films appear] on the narrative level to comply with the demands put on the industry to construct a national culture that shows Iran as isolated from Western influence, [accepting] the imposition of veiling and modesty laws to avoid censure and represent the national lifestyle as Islamic,” “traditionally Shi`ite,” and “pure,” even if anachronistically so by implication. (p. 232)

The discussion of Iranian cinema in the last chapter (chapter 5) does not address the research questions, concerning the centrality of the figure of the Babi to Iranian perceptions of modernity, and only one film – Ali Hatami’s “Delshodegan” – is discussed. The obvious questions are: What is the rationale for choosing this and only this film to exemplify the Islamic Republic of Iran’s project of “purifying the Nation through Representation”? Does the author assume that one text or one film represents (or presents) an entire history? And how is the *ta`zīyeh* implicated in the national cinema of Iran, enabling it to represent what the author claims is otherwise unrepresentable?

The main argument of the book is constructing the *ta`zīyeh* as a model of historiography, a passion play central to Shi`ite identity and enmeshed with Iranian nationalism, which is also the main context in which the figure of the Bab and later Khomeini (pp. 136-37) emerge. Understanding the importance of the *ta`zīyeh*, the way in which the figure of the Bab becomes the nation’s internal other as the unrepresentable, and how this affects the historical images of national reform in Iran is a worthy research project that would require a systematic and focused analysis of the Qajar period. Leaping forward to the contemporary era and selecting only one film to demonstrate the continuity of the *ta`zīyeh* as the main historiographic context for shaping the historical images of Iranian national reform is not the best scholarly method to pursue this research project.

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