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Burying the Beloved: 
Marriage, Realism, and Reform in Modern Iran 


Reviewed by Rebecca Gould, Yale-NUS College 

The field of Iranian gender studies has witnessed a sea change in the past decade. In the wake of the scholarship of Afsaneh Najmabadi, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and Arzoo Osanloo, it is impossible to read Iranian civil and religious codes pertaining to marriage and domesticity as neutral tools for regulating social life. Until now, this florescence of scholarship dealing with the Iranian state’s regulation of female and male sexuality has not been accompanied by a similar upsurge in the field of Persian
literary studies, which for the most part does not seriously consider the
social or gendered construction of the Iranian self. Amy Motlagh’s read-
ing of Iranian modernist prose (both novels and short-stories) against
the background of changes in normative gender roles aims to intervene
in this impasse and for the most part succeeds.

One of the most innovative aspects of Motlagh’s study is the way
she intersperses her chapters on literary texts with brilliant insights
concerning the intimate—and largely unexamined—relation between
dominant canons of literary representation and civil codes. “Although
the law may disguise itself as a standardization of existing norms,” Mot-
lagh observes, “laws are more frequently… instruments of social reform”
(12). While on the surface this argument many seem self-evident, the
introduction of literature represents an innovation in a field that has
historically shied away from questions of rhetoric and figuration. The
dialectic between legal norms and literary form unfolds throughout
Motlagh’s book with occasional flashes of brilliance, and is consistently
stimulating and new.

Another of Motlagh’s strengths is the author’s fluency in multiple
theoretical traditions and her ability to cross national boundaries, all
too rare in scholarship oriented to single national traditions. From
the Introduction, which opens by invoking Jean Franco’s work on the
persistence of dead bodies in Latin American cultural memory, to the
ensuing chapters, which engage Benedict Anderson and Ian Watt on the
rise of the novel, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s postrealism, and Fredric
Jameson’s concept of postmodernity (14, 64), Motlagh shines as a literary
critic conversant with the most exciting developments in social scientific
inquiry. Her capacity to speak at once to two distinct areas of inquiry
enriches her social and historical contextualization of the Iranian novel.

From the perspective of comparative literature, Burying the Beloved
is arguably most provocative when it revises Jameson’s conceptualization
of postmodernism as the defining characteristic of contemporary litera-
ture. Paraphrasing Appiah and contesting Jameson, Motlagh argues that
in postcolonial societies such as Iran and Africa, which are “imbricated
and tainted in colonial discourses,” we must be careful “not to subsume
[contemporary literary productions] into metropolitan categorizations”
(14). The discipline of comparative literature needs more work like this:
fully conversant with regnant understandings of literary signification,
and yet sufficiently immersed in the local contexts that fall outside mainstream paradigms to show how postcolonial archives revise our normative understandings of literary form.

Motlagh’s study ranges widely across the Persian literary canon. She is particularly effective at demonstrating parallels between classical and modern Persian texts, as when she argues that Iranian literary modernity transformed the female beloved (ma’shuq) of classical Persian poetry into a companionate wife, entrusted with the task of purifying the nation (51). This book’s guiding metaphor—burial of the female beloved—similarly suggests an analogy between the female body and the nation-state. Through excavations of text after text, we are shown how the male lovers of Iranian literature who search for their female beloveds inevitably bring about these women’s dismemberment.

When reviewing a book that is at once so provocative in its implications and so brief in its explications, the reader is inevitably left wishing for a fuller treatment of certain lines of inquiry. Motlagh focuses exclusively on the literature of modern Iran, leaving the Persianate literatures of Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and other Persophone borderlands to other scholars. Her empirical focus generates a desire for a break in the Iranocentric account Persian literary modernity. Such a desire is partially satisfied with her discussion of Zoya Pirzad’s I’ll Turn off the Lights (2001-2). Written by an Armenian fluent in Persian, Pirzad’s novel provides refreshing respite from what might otherwise be seen as a monolithic assemblage of purely Iranian texts. In the absence of such examples, there is the risk of assuming full congruity between the Persian language and Iranian ethnic identity.

Motlagh’s provocative discussion of Pirzad’s text, including her innovative reading of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s conception of “minor literatures” in connection with Pirzad’s deployment of Armenian to estrange the Iranian reader, leaves this reader wishing for a more direct critical assault on the nationalistic aspects of Iranian literary modernity. For, as the very term “Persophone” implies (10, 120) the commonplace restriction of modern Iranian literature to the nation-state that bears that name is itself a trope worth calling into question.

The historical transformations specific to the Iranian nation-state may mean that Iranocentrism is justified on intellectual grounds. But neither Motlagh nor her scholarly peers—Najmabadi, Mir-Hosseini, and
Osanloo—have reflected extensively on these empirical constraints. And yet, the implications of their work reach well beyond Iran. For the sea change that made such work possible to complete its course, the lines of inquiry pursued by Motlagh ought to be taken up with respect to other parts of the Persianate world, including Central Asia and Afghanistan. Motlagh’s literary acumen and conceptual powers make her perspective all the more needful and relevant to the entire Persianate ecumene. Her study of Iranian modernity ought to revise our conceptions of literary modernity generally.

Only two errors were noted, the first on page 135, which reproduces the same paragraph twice, and the second on page 142 (endnote 7), where the publication date assigned to Tayyeb Salih’s *Season of Migration to the North* is 1972. Salih’s novel was first published in 1966. In sum, this elegantly written work is necessary reading to scholars engaged in Islamic feminism, the history of modern Iran, and Persian literary culture.