


The Persian Prison Poem: Sovereignty and the Political Imagination

Rebecca Ruth Gould. *Edinburgh Historical Studies of Iran and the Persian World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). Pp. 312. \$95.33 hardcover. ISBN: 9781474484015

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Within the enclosed space of the prison cell, where even minimal movement is monitored and policed, it is writing that brings the center and the fringe together. In this space, power is no longer hierarchical, and authority can be subverted. Hence, prison writing bears witness to subversion of power structures. In this case, writing becomes a mode of resistance, a tool for protest, a proof for presence, and a medium for transformation. Merging the political with the aesthetic, the poetic with the prophetic, prison writing merges the poet's body with their body of work. This is how Rebecca Ruth Gould's *The Persian Prison Poem: Sovereignty and the Political Imagination* centers the Persian poet's prison writings as a revolutionary act, revolutionizing the genre. Gould's work is a welcome addition to the growing body of literature on the Persianate world against the backdrop of world literature. A thorough exploration of the perception of the poets' two bodies in the Persian prison poem, *The Persian Prison Poem* links the changing structures of power to the surging authority of the poet's voice during the decline of the caliph's power in the Abbasid Empire. Decentralizing the empire, the poets used their body of work to expose abuses of power, Gould argues. The Persian poets did so via writing from, with, and about their bodies from their prison cells. Gould explains that this type of "embodied prison poetry was born from a variety of wounds: metaphysical, personal, political" (p. 2). As such Gould's two main protagonists are the Ghaznavid-era poets Mas'ud Sa'd and Khaqani Shirvani, "both from peripheries, far from the traditional centers of Islamic rule in Baghdad, and far from regional centers of power in Ghazna and Nishapur" (p. 131). Khaqani is labeled in this book as "the main force behind the transformation of the prison poem into a political-theological genre" (p. 16). One of the most significant contributions of this book lies in Gould's translations and narrations of Khaqani's (and others') poems that have never been translated or highlighted before. To Gould, Khaqani's prison poems marked a turning point in world literature.

Gould makes an engaging move focusing on the process whereby a corporeal poetics was generated from the poet's body, resulting in the birth of a unique conception of the body bridging the conflict between worldly and poetic power. According to the author, this corporeal poetics was the reason for the emergence of "a new element into the traditional Islamic duality between faith-based authority (*din*) and earthly sovereignty (*Dawlat*)" (p. 5). *The Persian Prison Poem* traces this development in two stages which include the poetry of Mas'ud Sa'd and Khaqani. These two stages contributed to the refining of "Christian anthropology through an Islamic and Persianate lens to sacralize the body of the suffering and persecuted poet" (p. 5). Adding further depth to the richness of this complex work, Gould situates the Persian prison poem within the global medieval and early modern poetry by mapping the body of the poet onto that of the sovereign. In addition, Gould traces 20th-century observations of the sovereign and the sacred binary to illuminate the reasons for the conflict between the poet and the sovereign. To do so, Gould explores the Persian prison poem genre over a backdrop of the classic study of kingship by medieval historian Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), which opens with Shakespeare's *Richard II*



(1597) and ends with Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320)—a chronologically inverted analysis, one that Gould follows in the organization of the book as well.

The organization of the material into six chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue highlights not only the significance of the Persian prison poem as “an early prototype for the ‘prophetic dissidence,’” but it also allows for flexibility and fluidity. In the introduction, Gould explains that the book will follow a circuitous path to establish the political role of poetry in the world, beginning with technical issues in the classification of genre. In the meantime, Gould cautions the readers that prison poetry lacks an established genre system since it was not a concern of premodern Islamicate poetries. The book situates prison poetry within the topical genre of the literary system and the ways that it interacted with politics, extending the scope of the genre beyond the status quo. The author advises readers with interest in the literary genre to skip ahead to chapters 2 and 3, or those with interest in politics to chapters 4–6. This is a brilliant way of signposting the book for a broader audience with a variety of interests which will be appreciated by the readers.

In chapter 1, Gould charts out the ways that the intersection of politics and form, particularly the inversion of panegyric norms, leads to a bridging of aesthetics and politics, and culture and power in premodern world literature. Chapter 2 examines the prison poem as a lyric genre within corporeal poetries, by tracing its origins in what is today Central and South Asia established by Mas‘ud Sa‘d and Nasrullah Munshi. Here, Gould asks if oppression justifies rebellion and what the role of the insubordinate poet is in resisting unjust authorities. The author explains that while early Persian prison poems emerged from within a patronage dynamic, they were not subservient to it. Since “the imprisoned poet was locked away, sometimes forever, he was free to criticize the sultan” (p. 83). However, Gould argues that prison poetry flourished as a result of the imprisoned poet’s hopelessness for freedom since the poet was no longer under the pressure to please the patron. This chapter illustrates how Ghaznavid poets’ critiques were indirect in their subversion of political sovereignty. In chapter 3, Gould traces the development of the genre in the Caucasus, where the prison poet’s body came into conflict with the cosmos as well as the sovereign. This chapter focuses on Shirvan within the Seljuq Empire and Khaqani as its protagonist who transformed the political and aesthetic aspects of the genre. The author examines the prison poem “perforated by borderland conflicts, anxieties of influence, and competition among poets vying for literary pre-eminence and patronage” (p. 105). An insightful section of this chapter centers on the ways that Khaqani broke away from relating to the prison poetry from the former perspective of exile literature or oppression discourse. Khaqani made the prison poem available for appropriation for those who had not experienced direct imprisonment, changing the relationship between experience vs. imagination binary. Prison poetry now functioned as a metonym for the poet’s condition, much like Sufi writings. Examining the intersection of the political and the imaginative, Gould, therefore, views the genre as evidence of poetic sovereignty. In chapter 4, the author’s focus turns to the development of the discourse of the imprisoned poet’s power—the link between the prophetic and the poetic. In chapter 5, Gould examines Khaqani’s most famous poem titled “the Christian Qasida” from the perspective of prophetic-poetic dialectic. Here, the author sheds light on how “the literary representation of the poet’s body shifted in response to the changing status of the sovereign, whereby the king’s sacred legitimacy was undermined by his mortal and ethical decay” (p. 156). In chapter 6, Gould looks into two important medieval Persian political theorists in regards to carceral aesthetics to analyze the conception of authority and its subversion that resulted in the genre’s genesis and reception across Ghaznavid and Seljuq domains, from South Asia to the Caucasus.

The result is a thought-provoking scholarship through which the author challenges the status quo not only conceptually but in regards to the prison poem genre. Gould’s *The Persian Prison Poem* has valuable insights for a wide range of readers from scholars of Iranian and Persianate studies to world literature and history, as well as cultural comparative studies. The book should be adopted in Iranian and Middle Eastern literature courses, as well

as in graduate and undergraduate courses focusing on concepts such as prison literature, writing as a form of resistance, and genre studies.

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A Social History of Modern Tehran: Space, Power, and the City

Ashkan Rezvani Naraghi. *The Global Middle East Series* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023). Pp. 488. \$120 cloth. ISBN: 9781009188906

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The modern social history of Iran has often overlooked its spatial dimension, while the literature on Iranian cities and urban spaces has shown a relative neglect of social dynamics. In the prevailing literature on 19th-century Iranian society, urban spaces have been treated as neutral backdrops for social interactions, as spatial settings, streets, and buildings, both public and private spaces, are considered empty containers for social processes. In contrast, in studies focusing on Iranian cities and urban history, people are absent, portraying them as passive occupants who simply fill spaces without any reciprocal dialogue with them. To bridge this gap between the two dominant research traditions, Ashkan Rezvani Naraghi's book, *A Social History of Modern Tehran: Space, Power, and the City*, skillfully intertwines spatial analysis with social analysis. In an empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated way, Rezvani Naraghi demonstrates the deep interrelationship and mutual construction of social processes and spatial forms. Drawing on the "spatial turn" discourse in the social sciences and humanities, initially developed by Henri Lefever and David Harvey, the author adopts a social constructionist conception of space to view Tehran as a place which is both socially produced and simultaneously shapes social interactions.¹ In doing so, Rezvani Naraghi argues that between the mid-19th and mid-20th century, Iranian urban society and the state gradually abandoned their indigenous and traditional spatial understandings, embracing a new spatial knowledge influenced by Russian and Western European cities. This transformative process turned Tehran from a segmented society into a class-based city. The book analyzes four key relationships to explore the impact of this discursive shift: (1) the spatiality of ordinary people's social practices, (2) the contested relationship between society and the state, (3) the relationship between the state and the city in terms of space production and commodification, and (4) the spatial strategies of the state for social control and legitimation.

A Social History of Modern Tehran employs an array of archival sources, including newspapers, magazines, administrative files, diaries, travelogues, and maps, to demonstrate the transformation of Tehran's spatial discourses and spaces. The chapters of the book cover various historical periods. Beginning from the early 19th century and concluding in the mid-20th century, it looks over the 1870s expansions of Tehran, the 1906 Constitutional

¹ Although the author, a gifted mountaineer, perished in an avalanche in the mountains above Tehran in 2022 soon after completing this manuscript, his colleagues and friends in Iran, the UK, and the US helped bring his manuscript out into the world.