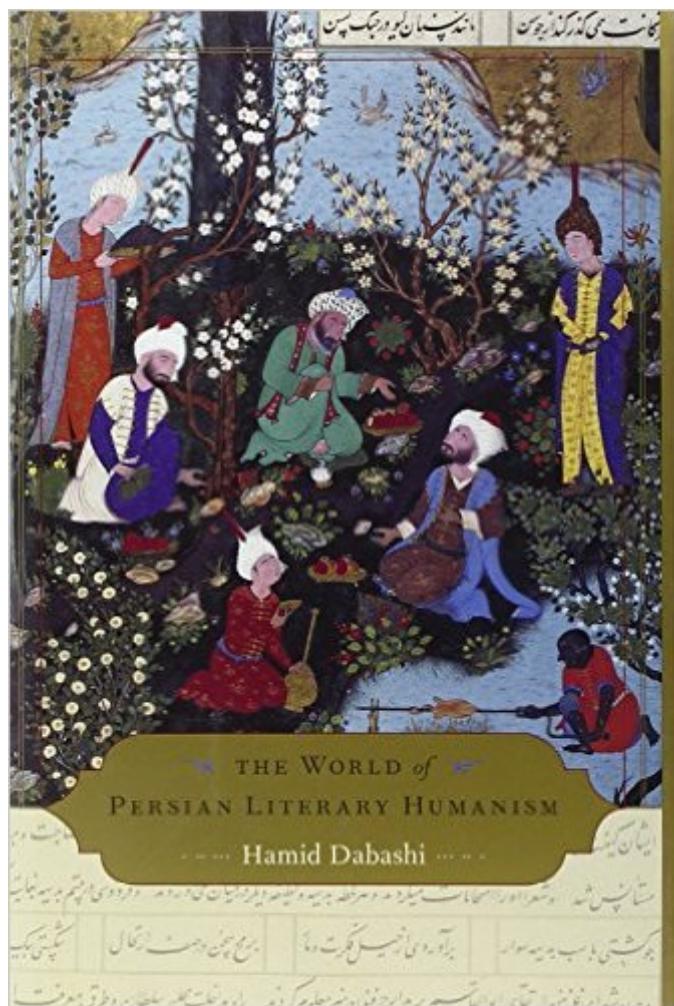


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The World Of Persian Literary Humanism



Synopsis

What does it mean to be human? Humanism has mostly considered this question from a Western perspective. Through a detailed examination of a vast literary tradition, Hamid Dabashi asks that question anew, from a non-European point of view. The answers are fresh, provocative, and deeply transformative. This groundbreaking study of Persian humanism presents the unfolding of a tradition as the creative and subversive subconscious of Islamic civilization. Exploring how 1,400 years of Persian literature have taken up the question of what it means to be human, Dabashi proposes that the literary subconscious of a civilization may also be the undoing of its repressive measures. This could account for the masculinist hostility of the early Arab conquest that accused Persian culture of effeminate delicacy and sexual misconduct, and later of scientific and philosophical inaccuracy. As the designated feminine subconscious of a decidedly masculinist civilization, Persian literary humanism speaks from a hidden and defiant vantage point-and this is what inclines it toward creative subversion. Arising neither despite nor because of Islam, Persian literary humanism was the artistic manifestation of a cosmopolitan urbanism that emerged in the aftermath of the seventh-century Muslim conquest. Removed from the language of scripture and scholasticism, Persian literary humanism occupies a distinct universe of moral obligations in which "a judicious lie," as the thirteenth-century poet Sheykh Mosleh al-Din Sa'di writes, "is better than a seditious truth."

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Customer Reviews

This is a timely book that introduces a largely unknown and misunderstood culture in the West,

written by one of the leading academics in this field. Nowadays most Westerners view Iran as the land of hostage takers, a theocracy ruled by belligerent mullahs, supporters and exporters of terrorism. Some in this country may be familiar with Avicenna (Ibn Sina) and Umar Khayyam, the latter through the translation of Edward Fitzgerald, in the late 19th century, of his "Rubaiyat" (quatrains in Persian). But Persian culture and humanism is much more vast with roots that begin about 1400 years ago. It could be argued that Persian culture had the strongest influence on the flourishing of the Golden Age of Islam, especially during the Abbasid Caliphate. The Muslim Arab conquerors of the Sasanid Empire (in AD 625) were, themselves, eventually invaded by the sophisticated and mature culture of Persia. Arabic language, customs and religion initially overwhelmed the local inhabitants; but Persian identity, instead of disappearing, coopted and transformed the Arabic culture while maintaining its innate uniqueness. Among the many examples, the author describes the work of Sibawayhi (AD 760-796), the foremost Arabic grammarian, or the philosophy of Razi (AD 865-925) or the polymath Ibn Sina (980-1037) and Ibn al-Muqaffa who all wrote their work in flawless Arabic and overcame "Arabic literary imperialism". Professor Dabashi eloquently describes the works of early poets Ferdowsi, Saadi, Rumi, Hafiz and Khayyam and continues through time until the 20th century to the prose and poetry of Shamlou, a contemporary of Mirza and Sepehri.

There are few surveys of Persian literature out there. The task of writing a survey that aspires to cover a thousand years of Persian literary production--as this book claims--is extremely difficult, let alone targeting both general and specialist readers alike. This book fails to cater to either audience for reasons I will delve into. This book is really not so much about the humanistic works of Persian-language poets and writers. You will find few translations of their works. Instead, Dr. Dabashi engages two main paradigms that he rightly argues reduce the worldly nature of this tradition: nativist/nationalist Iranian historiography on the one hand and Orientalist and later comparatist trends that set to nativise or racialize it on the other (ignore its worldliness). He offers his own reading as an alternative, one that he says does not privilege Persian' encounter with colonial modernity. Because Dr. Dabashi is so militantly concerned with these larger theoretical narratives (that he also reads very reductively), he twists and forces facts to fit his arguments. For instance, he completely ignores Persian literary circles that continued to operate in India way after the British did away with Persian as an administrative language. He also overlooks Persian's direct ties to the Mughal establishment as an important factor for its collapse, well because he is concerned with colonialism. Why? Because facts are not as important when your primary goal is to

sketch an ideological trajectory, one that may not always match Persian literary humanism's own historical trajectory.

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