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A FIRE OF LILIES

PERSPECTIVES ON LITERATURE AND POLITICS IN MODERN IRAN

AHMAD KARIMI-HAKKAK



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A Fire of Lilies

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*PERSPECTIVES ON LITERATURE AND POLITICS
IN MODERN IRAN*

by

Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak

Leiden University Press

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Contents

Acknowledgments, Notes, and a Dedication	7
Prologue by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak	9
Introduction by Asghar Seyed-Gohrab – The Bleeding Pen: Literature and Politics in Modern Iran	13
Part One	
1 – Revolutionary Posturing: Iranian Writers and the Iranian Revolution	29
2 – Protest and Perish: A History of the Writers’ Association of Iran	53
3 – Authors and Authorities: Censorship and Literary Communication in the Islamic Republic of Iran	85
4 – Of Hail and Hounds: The Image of the Iranian Revolution in Recent Persian Literature	107
Part Two	
5 – A Well Amid the Waste: An Introduction to the Poetry of Ahmad Shamlu	135
6 – Up from the Underground: The Meaning of Exile in Gholamhossein Sa’edi’s Last Short Stories	151
7 – Poet of Desires Turned to Dust: In Memoriam Mehdi Akhavan Saless	175
8 – A Storyteller and His Times: Ali-Akbar Sa’idi-Sirjani of Iran	189
Notes	203
Bibliography	221
Index	227

Acknowledgments, Notes, and a Dedication

This book would not have come together in this form, had it not been for years of insistence by my most esteemed friend and colleague, Professor Asghar Seyed-Ghorab. It was he who first thought that these writings of decades past may deserve the chance to be perused as a collection by a new generation of Iran scholars and students as well as general readers. He then graciously accepted my request and graced the volume with an insightful Introduction, which sheds much light on the historical and cultural contexts of all that follows his essay. And it was he who saw to it that this book would have an appropriate set of preliminaries as well as an index and a bibliography. As such my most sincere expression of gratitude should head the list of acknowledgments that I would like to register here: thank you most sincerely, Asghar.

Leiden University Press in general and Mrs. Anniek Meinders, Mrs. Kate Elliott, Mrs. Amber de Groot, and Mrs. Romy Uijen in particular, deserve my thanks for their part in making this book what it is, as did the two anonymous readers who made valuable suggestions toward updating these essays – thanks, one and all. Last but not least, I am grateful to the following for their permission to publish the essays as a book: *The International Journal of Middle Easter Studies* (IJMES), *World Literature Today*, *The Journal of Iranian Studies*, *Mazda Publishers* and *Iranbooks*.

The transliteration of Arabic and Persian words has been done in accordance with the Iranian Studies transcription guidelines. For proper names and Persian words commonly used in English I have used their more familiar forms. Also, I have used the Common Era dates throughout this book. As a small token of my appreciation and sympathy I would like to dedicate this work to all those who played a part in the making of the Iranian Revolution only to suffer its consequences.

Prologue

Fascinating thing, human memory, especially as it stares at certain moments of the past! Having had my youthful dream of becoming an academic fractured in 1973 in the form of the non-renewal of my contract with the Tehran college I was then teaching at, having then returned to the US to complete my education and gradually giving myself up almost entirely to the dream of an anti-monarchy revolution, and finally having returned to my homeland as soon after the victory of the Iranian Revolution as possible, I cherished the uncharted world of the possible that the revolution's potential offered much too dearly to let go of it because of so unimportant a set of incidents as the constant harassments the extremists in the revolutionary coalition exerted on academics like me to conform. Looking back on my tenacity now, forty years after the event of the revolution, I feel a certain uneasiness, at times in the form of a physical sensation.

The essays in this book began as barebone jottings in my journal contemporaneous with what was happening to me, around me, and to my homeland; what patterns the reader might detect were almost entirely after-thoughts a decade or two later, after I had had a chance once again to return to the safety and freedom of an exilic individual life as well as the security of a deeply cherished academic career. There was only one drawback: this was not a career in my country, as I had always assumed it would be, but the life of a professor and an exile. The result, as I see it now, is the gradual evolution of experiencing something, say a revolution, in an immediate way, moment by moment as if by breathing it in and breathing it out, followed by the slow simmering of putting it into writing about a place from a distance: a huge adjustment, though not only at a professional remove – psychological, philosophical, almost existential – from what I most loved about my home country, the Persian language and Iran's culture, and most especially the glorious literary heritage it has given to a world so desperately in need of some unmitigated wisdom and beauty.

Thinking anew some forty years later about the incidents and happenings that have been prime instigators for these essays, I still feel haunted by them. Having processed them away from the initial impressions they may have registered in me – as shocking, crazy, unreal – I recall them now as shards of my past life parading before me as I watch them in wide-eyed wakefulness; review them in my mind as compassionately as I can, often finding myself unprepared to have experienced them in the moment of their occurrence. I also almost invariably judge my initial responses as inadequate and myself as wanting in forming them. I question my part in processing them constantly. How could I even bear to see women around me subjected to cries of “put on your scarf or suffer blows on the head”? How would I take it to see foreign diplomats being paraded before cameras, collectively humiliated as spies? And how would I stand by and watch as hooligans ransacked the book collections in the Writers’ Association of Iran? There is no end to such daily thoughts!

The scenes that most frequently disturb me in my dreams are those related to the arrival of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Tehran, and what I see is exactly what became the stuff of so many press photographs of the event – multitudes of adoring followers crowding rooftops and treetops, trying to get a glimpse of the man they were all too eager to pledge allegiance to. These are followed by a recurring nightmare featuring the photographs of the late Shah’s longtime premier Hoveyda and three other top officials of the monarchical state, somehow juxtaposed in my mind to the responses I gave to my interrogators four years later, as they were trying to decide whether I must be purged from my academic position, which is what they decreed two weeks later. I recall the chief interrogator most vividly, as he pointed to the files in front of him as he asked me why I, an opponent of the monarchical state, had now turned into such a counterrevolutionary academic, such an ardent opponent of the Islamic republic. My response was uncompromising: the reasons are the same!

One memory I had suppressed completely until I was reminded of it many years later by the beneficiary as he recalled it in a public talk; it illustrates the concerns I had developed in the four years that I spent in post-revolution Iran. One early morning in the summer of 1983, over a year after the Writers’ Association had been disbanded, many of its members opting to live underground – an episode which I refer to in one of the essays in this book – I showed up on the doorstep of my friend, the poet Esmail Khoi, to tell him that it was time for him to leave the country, adding “immediately, this very day in fact!” The situation had deteriorated much

too rapidly for us to develop mechanisms to protect the members. Some had fled the country, but Esmail was much too nonchalant about his safety, it seemed to me. A few days earlier our mutual friend, poet and playwright Sa'ïd Soltanpur, had been arrested at his wedding, and I had just heard that morning from the state-run radio station the official announcement that he had been executed along with a number of other prominent opponents of the new government.

The two men accompanying me – trusted smugglers, I had been assured – were there on Esmail's doorstep to get him out of the country. "Time to go, Esmail," I said in a tone of voice that made it clear I was not joking, and he did leave with the men. What most haunts me still is his last words: "Take care of these, they are my poems." And he handed to me the bag he had been carrying from one hideout to another, once or twice a week. I knew then his words would leave an unforgettable mark on me. We kissed and he departed, in the care of the men who had promised to get him out – fortunately they succeeded. The words from his poem entitled "People are forever right," which I cite in one of the essays still ring in my ears now and then, even when the context is no longer Iran but, say, the United States in 2019.

Easily summoning what immediate responses or reactions such experiences – such experiencing – are capable of instigating, I ask myself now what other lasting marks they may have left within me. I see the event grow distant in my mind's eye, yet I cannot help feeling overwhelmed anew when summoning my recollections of the enormity of the moments I have collected personally – and doubtless innumerable Iranians have witnessed collectively – the weight of our common responsibility in rendering them tellable in a more or less exact, or at least honest, manner begins to press upon our minds. And then the haunting yet inevitable feeling that I, for one, but perhaps many of us, may have failed time and again to register in the ledger of time. And that feeling of failure, I now think, was itself an inalienable part of the process I have gone through over the intervening decades.

Yet, I know instinctively – I have always known it seems – even at moments of absorbing unwelcome news or urging myself to maintain my sanity, if not my balance, or reminding myself of the urgency of jotting down something to enable me to write the fuller version later, that I cannot help but harness my emotional reactions to that which was external to me and develop an impression, however raw or passing, of the gravity of the moment, the texture of the lived experience. Each personal observation, each news item of one more atrocity happening around me grips me in its spell, making me sense

an overwhelming feeling of the impossibility of the task of reflecting it in anything close to a satisfactory way, and at the same time keeping my mental balance as I commit it to writing.

These essays are now before you, reader, elevated by a well-informed scholarly introduction aimed at clarifying the larger historical context that surrounded their genesis.¹ Overarching them are the processes which have given shape to my life, as I witnessed Iranian intellectuals, particularly Iran's poets and writers, assume the revolutionary posturing that formed the trajectory of my youth as well as that of millions of other young Iranians, longing for a free society. This is perhaps true of most other writings that reflect the history of some consequential event, as they trace the growing aversion to an existing situation that begins to swell within us as we contemplate the power systems around us. We certainly feel motivated by the sentiments that seem to express exactly how we feel towards certain power structures existing in our world. Then, as the first rumblings of the possibility of a change appears, we feel certain it would be a positive turn of events. Struggling to remain optimistic, even as we see revolutions launched by unlikely leaders go not to seasoned, politically tested servant leaders, but to leaders we have hardly grown to know or had reason to trust. The Iranian Revolution was happening whether people like me wanted it or not, and all young people like me could do was to submit to the process at hand and hope to be able to seize what possibilities might arise.

Speaking for myself only that is what pressed upon me the urgency to return to my country just as soon as I could and begin to observe what was happening at close quarters, and actively participate in them, as we might. The essays gathered in this book chronologically follow stages of a revolution after it happened, all the way up to the time when people like me, let's say I for one, lose all hope and decide to withdraw, reverse course, or leave the scene, as I did. By the summer of 1983, the Islamic Republic had managed to quash almost all resistance to its power and dash all hopes for gradual reform, as well as losing much of its legitimacy. I had most certainly lost all the hopes that I had tried to cling to for over four years, since my return to Iran in the early months of 1979, the season that had been affectionately dubbed "The Springtime of Freedom." I had also lost some of my most cherished friends, including Sa'id Soltanpur, whose cruel arrest, summary trial in an "Islamic" court, and execution I have alluded to above. The feeling that weighed most heavily on my heart was sensing that I might never see my home country again.