

Book review

Katouzian, Homa (2024). *Humour in Iran: Eleven-hundred Years of Satire and Humour in Persian Literature*. I.B. Tauris.

Persian humour is as delightful as it is understudied. This is despite the fact that Iranian cultures prominently feature different forms of humour and satire across a wide range of media. Such richness and diversity can partly be attributed to the tumultuous history of the country. Once a vast empire, Iran has been paying the price of its imperial project for centuries now, and people and artists seem to have learned to use humour to cope with difficult circumstances and accept what they cannot change. Among others, recorded and surviving satire and humour peak during Mongol invasion and conquest in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Constitutional Revolution in early twentieth century, and under the contemporary Islamic regime. Humour and satire seem to express the horrors, disappointments, and disillusionments that people have been grappling with. This is not to claim that they inevitably pursue liberationist causes and never lapse into being coopted or serving the power structure, of course (see Giamario, 2022).

Many books have striven to capture the history of humour in Iran with varying degrees of success. Faradjian and Barforoush (1991/2), Nabavi (2001/2), and Salahi (2008/9) largely try to collect instances of humour and satire from Persian literary canon and reflect on their craft as satirists. Abedinifard (2015), Afary and Afary (2022), Behzadi (1999/2000), Farjami (2017), Javadi (2005), Okhovvat (1993), Sadr (2002/3), and Zekavat (2017), among others, take a more critical approach by trying to provide context for the works they analyse. Homa Katouzian's recent contribution, *Humour in Iran: Eleven-Hundred Years of Satire and Humour in Persian Literature*, is the most recent attempt by a distinguished scholar to anthologise and translate examples of Persian humour and satire.

The book opens with a brief survey of previous studies on Persian humour and a quick note on the use of terminology in translation. The author resorts to terms commonly used in the Western literary tradition such as *humour* and *satire* as well as those primarily summoned in Persian (and Arabic) traditions like *hadjv* (which borders on personal attack) and *hazl* (which implies deviations from the etiquette of politeness to create laughter). Nevertheless, the author does not strive to settle all questions related to the use of terminology and definitions.

From there, the book proceeds to compile a wide range of examples and translates them into English. Most translations are offered with their original Persian texts. A reader might be put off with infelicities in the Persian texts and transliterations which seem to be due to less than careful layout and proofreading. The poor quality of production extends to the pictures in the hard copy.

The progression and organisation of the materials differ from chapter to chapter. Some chapters focus on specific literary periods like "The first three centuries," "From the Classics to the Neoclassics," and "The Neoclassical Period: *Bazgasht-e Adabi*." Others concentrate on particular literary figures like "Rumi, Sa'di, Hafiz," "Obeyd Zakani," "Iraj and Bahar," "Dehkhoda and Eshqi," and "Aref, Seyyed Ashraf, Parvin E'tesam, etc." while two chapters foreground genres including "Satirical fiction" and "The satirical press." Each chapter contains a generous range of examples alongside their translations, but it does not try to analyse them

within any specific theoretical or methodological framework. The same story is true in the case of the concluding chapter that includes many cartoons from modern satirical press. When historical insights are occasionally offered to facilitate the context-bound examples, however, the explanations tend to be quite refreshing and helpful.

Katouzian is fully aware of the significance of context in understanding humour and warns that “[t]he modern and contemporary readers ... should therefore bear ... socio-historical context in mind” (p. 4); nonetheless, the book rarely provides context or in-depth analysis. One reason might be that it tries to cover 1,100 years of history over 291 pages and does not shy away from generously quoting delightful anecdotes, poems, and stories. A potential consequence might be that the international audience who is not familiar with Iranian studies cannot always fully appreciate the humour. Another is that some excerpts about women, LGBTQI+ communities, and certain ethnicities might come across as sexist, homophobic, and/or offensive to the reader. The fact that very few women and their works are represented in the book does little to clear up potential misunderstandings.

To use Nasrin Rahimieh’s words printed on the blurb, this book offers a “rich medley of Persian prose and poetry”. Coupled with fresh translations into English, these can cheer up general readers and benefit students new to Farsi humour. The book can also provide a point of departure for future studies into multimodal humour on decentralised and digitised outlets such as social media that proffer a space to circumvent state censorship in Iran, particularly in an age of socio-political unrest. Future research will hopefully give voice to historically marginalised communities, other languages spoken in Iran besides Persian or Farsi, and will pay attention to Persian-speaking artists in diaspora and across the Persianate world.

Massih Zekavat

University of Groningen, Netherlands
s.m.zekavat@rug.nl

References

- Abedinifard, M. (2015). *Humour and gender hegemony: The panoptical role of ridicule vis-à-vis Gender*. (Doctoral thesis, University of Alberta).
- Afary, J., and Afary, K. (2022). *Molla Nasreddin The making of a modern trickster, 1906-1911*. Edinburg University Press.
- Behzadi, H. (1999/2000). *Satire in Iran*. Sadough.
- Faradjian, M., & Barforoush, M. B. (1991/2). *Iranian satirists: From the Constitutional Revolution until the Islamic Revolution*. Three volumes. Bonyad.
- Farjami, M. (2017). *Iranian political satirists*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/thr.5>
- Giamario, P. (2022). *Laughter as politics: Critical theory in an age of hilarity*. Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474491563>
- Javadi, H. (2005). *History of satire in Persian literature*. Karavan.
- Nabavi, E. (2001/2). *Exploring satire in Iran*. Iranian Society.
- Okhovat, A. (1993). *The semiotics of humour*. Nashr-e Farda.
- Sadr, R. (2002/3). *Twenty years of satire: Satire after the revolution*. Hermes.
- Salahi, O. (2008/9). *The oral history of Iran: Omran Salahi*. Sales.
- Zekavat, M. (2017). *Satire, humor and the construction of identities*. John Benjamins. <https://doi.org/10.1075/thr.6>