

MINOO MOALLEM, *Persian Carpets: The Nation as a Transnational Commodity* (New York: Routledge, 2018). 160 pages. \$120.00 cloth, \$23.99 paper, \$15.00 e-book.

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Minoo Moallem's *Persian Carpets: The Nation as a Transnational Commodity* is a fascinating genealogy of how the Persian carpet became a modern transnational commodity. Moallem traces how the carpet became an object of Orientalia worthy of collection, display in museums, and use as home décor. Her multifaceted approach explores not only how the Persian carpet became a desirable object in homes across the West, first as a luxury item and later as a mass-produced commodity, but also how it came to represent the nation of Iran and grew into a symbol of class status in Iran and a symbol of the Iranian diaspora after the 1979 revolution. She also highlights both the aesthetic and affective dimensions in the process of commodification, showing how affective communities are constructed in the commodification of aesthetic objects.

This is a highly original work: there is no other book that approaches the Persian carpet in this novel and critical way. What is most remarkable is how Moallem brings together a cultural studies analysis of the politics of representation in the production of Orientalism with an analysis of the political economy and labor practices involved in creating Persian carpets. Thus, her interdisciplinary approach considers labor, commodification, affect, aesthetics, and transnational circulation and meaning. Moallem's main argument is that the aestheticization and commodification of the Persian carpet was accomplished through concealing the labor conditions of its production. She builds upon Marx's term "commodity fetishism" to underline the ways in which the process of commodification conceals the factory, mass production, and the conditions endured by workers. She narrates this commodification of the Persian carpet through the historical lenses of colonialism, capitalism, the transnationalization of labor, and the transnationalization of systems of representation.

Moallem introduces the term “civilizational commodities” to refer to how Orientalist commodities like the Persian carpet produced cultural and civilizational differences and constructed meaningful boundaries between East and West, Oriental and Occidental, the primitive and modern, and the religious and the secular. Other concepts central to her analysis are “affective consumption” – how consumerism becomes a vehicle to produce an imagined community (125–26), “commodity aesthetics” – how commodities are aestheticized, circulated, and consumed (15), and “scopic economy” – how the vision central to representation is crucial to creating the value needed for economic exchange (12–15). Each term serves as an entry point for Moallem’s rich analysis.

The book is based on Moallem’s extensive research, traveling to carpet-producing locations around the world, from Paris and London to Istanbul and various locations in Iran. She interviewed carpet makers, dealers, consumers, and collectors. She also conducted archival research at various locations including the Carpet Archives Centre in Kidderminster, England; Tehran’s Carpet Museum of Iran, and the Textile Museum in Washington, DC.

Chapter 1 examines connoisseur books, a genre of publication that produced Orientalist knowledge about Persian carpets in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moallem traces how such books produced the desire and demand for carpets by educating potential European consumers about the aesthetics, value, and “civilizational optic of empire” (28). Central to this process of education was designating Persian carpets as *domestic* Orientalia, thus representing cultural difference as transformed from primitivism to civilization in the process of commodification.

Chapter 2 focuses on how Persian carpets acquired Orientalist meaning through representations at world fairs, and in Hollywood films and advertisements in the early twentieth-century United States, as the carpets went from being considered luxury items to mass-produced products. Films operated as a supplement to capitalism, producing value for the empire and the nation through aesthetic representations. The more the Persian carpet was depicted as different and magical, the more value it acquired as a desirable object. Moallem demonstrates how such representations invested Persian carpets with value and inspired consumerism, thus highlighting how representations are crucial to connecting “an economy of affects with political economy, binding empire and nation as well as labor and capital” (48).

Chapter 3 explores the convergence of the spectacle of commodity with the spectacle of labor. Moallem focuses on the spectacle of feminized labor that serves to both exoticize the carpets themselves and to naturalize the labor needed to produce them. She notes that the commodification of the Oriental carpet coincided with the “transnationalization of exploitative labor” (74). It is not just that exploitative labor practices are concealed; in this chapter, the author argues there has been a particular spectacularization of labor that devalues carpet makers as primitive and unskilled rural and tribal women who are oppressed by their culture, religion, and men, thus framing British and U.S. consumption as beneficial. The purported helplessness of the female laborers gained aesthetic value as photographs circulated in connoisseur books, newspapers, and carpet-selling websites that promoted a “discourse of development and the exoticization and feminization of poverty” (89). While much of the book highlights how the Persian carpet as a commodity is an expression of colonial modernity, chapter 4 examines how it became a national commodity through shifts in the Iranian political landscape. Here, Moallem makes two arguments: “first, nations are commodities produced and reproduced through mass-mediated and commercial cultures, and second, nations are not only imagined communities but also affective communities” (103). Moallem shows how the commodification of Persian carpets in Iran was a form of “affective nationalism” (107) that not only made the carpets an integral part of Iranians’ home culture, but also a commodity to be exhibited and displayed beyond Iran to represent the nation. What began as Iran representing itself as a carpet nation eventually transformed to a discourse of the “nation as carpet” (125).

Chapter 5 examines the new values and meanings invested in the Persian carpet since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, particularly for Iranians in the diaspora. Moallem interviews carpet dealers about the impact of the U.S. embargo on Persian carpets that was in effect from 1979 to 2016 and made it more difficult to obtain carpets. Carpet makers moved to India and elsewhere, thus dislocating or deterritorializing the carpet. Now, Persian carpets are purchased online and marketing seeks to conceal this displacement, instead promoting a commodity that symbolizes security or groundedness for those in the diaspora. Moallem analyzes more than fifty Persian carpet-selling websites and finds a discursive emphasis on connection and affective community in a transnational world, materializing nation beyond time and space (138). This chapter also includes a fascinating discussion of the

militarization of the carpet industry through the use of militarized tools (i.e., power looms and projectile looms) to increase the speed and decrease the cost of manufacturing, as well as the use of militarized language (i.e., referring to the carpet bombing of Afghanistan and Iraq).

This interdisciplinary book contributes to postcolonial studies, transnational feminism, cultural studies, American studies, and Middle East studies. Scholars in these various fields, especially those interested in how to approach an object as transnational and at the intersection of cultural studies and political economy, will benefit from reading this book. It is a fascinating, surprising, multifaceted work and an excellent model of transnational and interdisciplinary scholarship.