

AFSHIN MARASHI, *Exile and the Nation, The Parsi Community of India and the Making of Modern Iran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020). Pp. 328. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN 9781477320792.

REVIEWED BY ERIK FREAS, Social Sciences Department, Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York, New York, NY, email: efreas@bmcc.cuny.edu



In this well-written and extremely engaging book, Afshin Marashi examines two early twentieth-century ideological projects pertaining to the modern history of Iran. The first, which began with the 1905 Constitutional Revolution and reached fruition during the 1920s and '30s with the rise of Reza Shah and the Pahlavi State, was a nation-building project, an attempt to construct an Iranian national identity along neoclassical lines, primarily by emphasizing Iran's pre-Islamic history. The second, initiated by India's Parsi (i.e., Zoroastrian) community beginning in the late nineteenth century, was a reformational project that sought to modernize the Zoroastrian faith into something reflective of a distinctly modern religious and cultural ethos, thus making it more relevant to contemporary Zoroastrians. Marashi's book is concerned with how these two ideological projects came to inform one another, a consequence of an increased level of engagement between Iranians and India's Parsi community during the first half of the twentieth century.

Iranian nationalist ideologues were attracted to India's Parsi community in the belief that they were a living remnant of a forgotten cultural heritage, one corresponding to Iran's neo-classical past, supposedly insulated from the cultural effects of Arabization and Islamization that had transformed Iran following the Muslim-Arab conquest. For India's Parsi community – which by the beginning of the twentieth century had become extremely prosperous – engagement with Iran was driven by the hope that a reformed Zoroastrian faith might provide a basis for becoming reacquainted with and improving the lot of their poverty-stricken coreligionists. More specifically, it was

believed that linking this modernist, reformist religious project with a nationalist ideological project aimed at redefining Iranian national identity in line with Iran's pre-Islamic past (of which Zoroastrianism was a defining aspect) would serve to reinforce liberalizing reforms in Iran, thus elevating the political and social status of Iran's Zoroastrians, and perhaps even one day fulfilling a "romanticized dream of a Parsi return to Iran" (5) – the fulfillment of a "myth of exile and return" (hence, the title of the book). From the other side, Iranian nationalist ideologues seeking to address the problem of Iran's supposed decay and lack of progress increasingly looked not to Europe for the antecedents of modernization but to their own history and culture, as represented by India's Parsi community, a living manifestation of who Iranians were in the past, and whose prosperity and progress would serve as a model for Iran's cultural, economic, and political regeneration.

Marashi relates this history in an intriguing way, with each chapter devoted to an intellectual figure representative of certain key ideological developments. The first chapter focuses on Arbab Khaykhosrow Shahrokh, an Iranian Zoroastrian who served on the Iranian majlis and participated in the drafting of the constitution in 1905. He was an active proponent of a modernist, ecumenical understanding of Zoroastrianism – one reflective of the aforementioned ideological project associated with India's Parsi community – as a basis for formalizing "the representation of Iran's religious minority communities" (23), both politically and socially. This ideological project is directly addressed in the second chapter via the figure of Dinshah J. Irani, the son of a wealthy Iranian diaspora family within Bombay's Parsi community, and who might best be described as a cultural philanthropist. Irani played a central role in introducing to Iranian intellectuals this reformed, modernist version of Zoroastrianism, which greatly influenced their neoclassical reformulation of Iranian national identity.

The third chapter, which considers the Indian Nobel laureate, poet, and artist Rabindranath Tagore and his trip to Iran in 1932, serves to contextualize the encounter between Iranian intellectuals and India's Parsi community within a broader, continent-wide intellectual movement that sought to define the ideological underpinnings of an Indo-Iranian foundational civilization racially rooted in Aryanism (that was already informing Nazism in Europe at the time). The fourth chapter introduces the reader to the scholar-poet Ebrahim Purdavud, a non-Zoroastrian Iranian intellectual who was instrumental in

promoting this modernist conception of Zoroastrianism as a defining aspect of Iranian national identity in a manner reflective of his European Orientalist education, much of which took place in Paris and Berlin. The final chapter focuses on the “anticolonial and proto-Third World activist” (18) Abdulrahman Saif Azad, who personifies the point at which this neoclassical conception of Iranian identity, initially a basis for advocating liberal ideals of inclusivity (especially with respect to Iran’s non-Muslim religious communities), took on pseudo-fascist undertones, as greater emphasis was given its supposed Aryan roots, in a manner that found ready correspondence with Nazi propaganda.

Marashi’s situating of the Iranian-Parsi encounter within a broader Indian Oceanic framework, wherein Europe (its imperial presence in the region aside) is in many ways peripheral to the developments related in the text, is consistent with current trends in Middle East scholarship, which have seen a recentralizing of Middle East history away from the Mediterranean (and a focus on Ottoman-European relationships) to the Indian Ocean, and India in particular, during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. As Marashi notes, during the period in question, the region saw a tremendous circulation of peoples and ideas, of which the Parsi-Iranian encounter is but one example. Especially relevant is that Marashi is able to demonstrate that Europe was neither the main impetus nor model for all imaginings of modernization among Iranian intellectuals and nationalists. This point is especially emphasized in the third chapter on Tagore, perceived by many Iranians as a symbol of Indo-Iranian authenticity when he visited their country in 1932, particularly in terms of the philosophy he advocated – a transnational “pan-Asianist” vision, wherein Iran and India were part of a larger Asian ideal of civilization – but also in his physical appearance, that of the “ideal-type sage personifying a notion of Indo-Iranian authenticity” (124). Thus, Marashi reveals that these attempts at formulating an Iranian national identity along neo-classical lines are better understood within the context of a broader ideological movement aimed at constructing an Indo-Iranian neoclassicist civilizational foundation applicable to all of Asia, than as derivative of European Orientalist thought.

Marashi does not, however, suggest that European Orientalism had no role to play in this regard; while not central to the ideological developments related here, its influence was by no means negligible, not least in the emphasis given Iran’s pre-Islamic history. Especially relevant was the German Orientalist, Josef Markwart, with whom the aforementioned Ebrahim Pardavud – the subject of chapter four –

became well acquainted during his time in Berlin. Markwart conceived of Iranian identity in racial terms, corresponding to Iran's pre-Islamic history, which he characterized as a kind of "golden age." Notably, it was a "golden age" that ended with the introduction of Islam, here understood as initiating a long period of decline following Iran's conquest by the Arabs, a people represented as savages who came to Iran and "consumed the kingdom" (169). Much like Marwart, Pardavud desired nothing more than that "Iranians . . . revert to the ways of their forefathers and ancestors" (163). As explained by Marashi, Pardavud saw his "primary intellectual mission [as] a public one of reviving Iranian national identity through his use of language and his contributions to popularizing a nationalist version of pre-Islamic Iranian history" (167). Pardavud's scholarship—much of which would inform his more accessible poetry—was concerned primarily with translating Zoroastrian religious texts, little known outside of Iran's small Zoroastrian community, into modern Persian, thus rendering them accessible to a much broader Iranian audience and transforming what were essentially liturgical scriptural texts into "textual artifacts of an Iranian national heritage" (139). In many ways, Pardavud embodies the point of intersection between the two ideological projects that are the focus of this book.

The story does not end there, however, as the final chapter examines the increased emphasis on "race" during the interwar years as a defining aspect of this neoclassical Iranian national identity, indicative of a shared Aryan point of origin between Iranians and Indians. In many ways, this was but one manifestation of a broader Aryan movement, of which the Nazis are the most well-known example, and, as with the Nazis, it resulted in illiberal tendencies in terms of how Iranian national identity was conceived. Relevant to Marashi's broader topic is that Zoroastrians were increasingly defined as the living embodiment of this Aryan link, somewhat ironically given that, initially, a major impetus behind this nationalist ideological project was that it should provide a basis for liberal reforms aimed at better assimilating Iran's non-Muslim religious communities (most notably, Iran's Zoroastrians), both politically and socially. Marashi does an admirable job contextualizing this tendency, not only with respect to global Aryanism (and racial politics in general) but also within the broader "global-legal-political discourse of nationalism" (122) that prevailed during the interwar years, which saw political figures like Reza Shah seek to strengthen the moral and political authority of their respective states vis-à-vis the larger international

system by situating them within a broader cultural and/or civilizational framework. As explained by Marashi, the construction of a neo-classical pre-Islamic Iranian nationalist identity racially linked to India on the basis of a supposed common (i.e., Aryan) point of origin served both to emphasize “Iran’s political and territorial sovereignty while also situating Iran within the deeper civilizational parameters of an Indo-Iranian culture” (122).

To conclude, this is an extremely well-researched and well-written work that addresses a topic that has yet to be adequately addressed (at least for a non-Iranian audience). There is also a welcomed element of storytelling to the book not often found in scholarly, historical works. Marashi introduces a fair amount of biographical detail, effectively conveying the personalities of the various individuals involved and the manner of their interactions with one another (something underscored by the inclusion of a number of photos). Indeed, it is in both the richness of the biographical detail Marashi provides and his versatile and nuanced account of the intellectual and political developments, that the depth of Marashi’s research and writing skills most shine. In conclusion, this book is highly recommended for anyone interested in the history of modern Iran, a better understanding of nationalism in a phenomenological sense, or a well-grounded, historically based story related in a highly entertaining and informative way.