The inclusion of short biographies of the featured poets offers a fascinating insight into their lives, adding another dimension to the compositions featured. The bios also reflect the editor’s selection of featured poets based on technical and artistic merit in addition to their sense of history, even though she did also include non-established poets in order to highlight new voices.

The anthology on the whole serves to satisfy to some extent the curiosity about the status of women in the Arab world and shows awareness of their remarkable contributions and creativity. It truly serves to, as Handal states, “eradicate invisibility” of Arab female poets and fulfils the editor’s aim to “bridge the religious, linguistic and geographical space existing among Arab women worldwide” (p. xii, ‘preface’).

Encompassing the diversity that characterizes the Arab world in general, this objective and balanced analysis of the rich traditions of both the past and the present in the realm of poetry is a must read for poets, poetry students and the general public. According to the editor, the book is currently included in curriculums in many universities worldwide, but mainly in the United States.

One of the most remarkable results of this work is the way it can help change perceptions as Handal stated when asked (by the reviewer): “Those who have a chance to read this book, will see Arab women differently afterwards, that is the power of the word. Also, creative mediums are powerful weapons — they not only take us to new words, works and worlds but they awaken in us the need to know more and hopefully help us build bridges of understanding”.

Nimah Ismail Nawwab


These lectures were delivered in the summer of 1979, soon after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. As such, they may be viewed more as a defence of the new order than an unbiased, disinterested analysis of a historical event.
The first lecture is on “Iran and Shi’ism”. In this Hamid Algar argues that the Islamic Revolution is not an exclusively Shī‘ah phenomenon. Indeed, those who brand it as such, want to suggest that the rest of the Islamic world does not need a revolution or cannot experience one. He argues that, in many cases, the Shi‘īs rejected accommodation with the dominant powers whereas the Sunnīs did not. Moreover, the Shī‘ahs celebrate martyrdom whereas, though valued in theory by the Sunnīs, it was not ritualized by them in an yearly festival. These two theories created a kind of militancy in Shī‘ī Islam which was “lacking in a large number of the Sunni segments of the Muslim Ummah” (p. 17).

Based upon this potential militancy the Shī‘ah ‘ulamā’ in Iran started evolving the doctrine of resistance to illegitimate political authority even from Safavid times when the very powerful Shāh ‘Abbās (1587–1629) was ruling over Iran. Indeed, Shāh ‘Abbās himself was confronted by Mullā Ahmad Ardabili who told him that he was merely the trustee of the kingdom and not its owner. During the Qajar period the Uṣūlis (those who believed that the ‘ulamā’ could interpret religion in the absence of the Imām) became more powerful than the Akbārīs (who believed that the ‘ulamā’ could only refer to the hadīth to arrive at a conclusion and not interpret the Islamic law). This led to the emergence of mujtahids who interpreted and executed the law. These mujtahids began to exercise power outside the religious domain also. For instance, when in 1892 the government gave the monopoly of tobacco cultivation to a British firm, the Iranian public opinion was against this decision. However, it was only when Mirzā Ḥasan Shirāzī, the leading mujtahid, gave a decree saying that the consumption of tobacco was unlawful as long as it was handled by the British monopoly, that people boycotted it effectively. Having traced this history of resistance by the ‘ulamā’ to political power, Algar places Ayatullah Rohullah Khomeini’s assumption of power in this historical context.

The second lecture continues where the first one leaves off. It is called ‘Imam Khomeini: the embodiment of a tradition’ and it refers, in a general way, to the role of the ‘ulamā’ in Islam before it comes to Khomeini. In this context the lecturer discusses the development of such centres of Shī‘ah learning as Najaf and Qum. He goes on to discuss individual ‘ulamā’ and expresses the opinion that, notwithstanding his religious learning, Ayatullah Burujardi remained silent in the face of secularization in Iran and the royalist coup d’état of August 1953. In contrast to this kind of apolitical ‘ālim, he presents Khomeini, whose brief biographical sketch follows, one whose primary role was resistance to secular authority. This resistance, he says, was religious
because it was informed by religious values. Moreover, the focus of the struggle as far as Khomeini himself was concerned, as well as the idiom he used, was religious. As such his lack of a precise political strategy itself served as a strategy since it provided a moral platform to the struggle against the Shah.

After these two lectures, Hamid Algar turns to the thought of Ali Shari'ati, the ideologue of the Revolution. Shariati’s contribution was that he used the idiom of modern philosophy and sociology, which he had studied in France, to the analysis and interpretation of Islam. This made him appeal to the educated, urban youth who would flock to listen to his lectures in the Husayniya-yi Irshad. Finally, this place was closed down in 1973 and Shari'ati imprisoned. In 1977 he died in exile in England, apparently of a heart attack. The lecture gives a competent summary of Shari'ati’s major concepts and the interpretation he gives of them. One of his concepts, Safavi Shi’ism and Alavi Shi’ism, is interesting for the whole Muslim world. He says Safavi Shi’ism is merely an establishment doctrine which teaches antagonism towards the Sunnis. However, Alavi Shi’ism, based on the love of the Caliph ’Ali, does not. Such views made Shari'ati open to the charge of being a ‘Crypto Sunni or even a Wahhabi’ (p. 97) but actually he earned the goodwill of the Muslim world by such views. In the end, the lecturer is at pains to emphasize that there is no contradiction between the spirit of the teachings of Shari'ati and Khomeini and that any attempt to divide Iran with reference to them would fail.

The last lecture is on “The Year of the Revolution”. Here Hamid Algar takes on the role of a propagandist and defender of the regime. He begins by tracing out the events which led to the Revolution. This series of events is now well known but soon after the Revolution people needed this essential information. One point which Algar makes is that the Revolution was immensely helped by modern technology. Khomeini’s words were taped and sent to Iran through the telephone. In Iran they were put on hundreds of tapes and made available to everybody. This was how the people were inspired to put up such a stiff resistance to the Shah’s regime that it finally came to an end.

The author then says that the Western powers as well as their regional satellites opposed the Revolution and opines that such a development could also occur in the Sunni Muslim world. Then he turns his attention inwards claiming that the revolutionary fervour Islamized the Iranian society. Even the secular opposition “was obliged to abandon its positions and to conform unconditionally to the demands advanced by Imam Khomeini” (p. 141). He
ends by saying that the Muslims of the whole world have a lot to learn from the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

Every lecture is followed by a question and answer session but really hard, fundamental questions are not raised. For instance, Hamid Algar’s contention that political parties were unwelcome in the Islamic political system (p. 152) could lead to the dictatorship of a single party in the name of Islam. This assertion was, however, not subjected to criticism or even discussion. Secondly, the possibility that the Revolutionary government could crack down on all kinds of opposition — as it in fact did later — was not even expressed. Indeed, the very lack of freedom which the Iranian youth are protesting against today were made possible by some of the certainties of the Revolution which Hamid Algar does not examine critically.

On the theoretical plane, Hamid Algar often gives simplistic explanations of complex events. He is right about the tradition of political resistance in Shi’i Islam but there was also a more modern tradition of resistance, especially the lower middle class and proletarian resistance, in Iranian cities the roots of which were economic. This has mostly been ignored by Hamid Algar. The resistance of the secularized Iranian educated youth, whether attracted to Shari’ati or the Tudeh Party or to any other ideology, also helped to feed the animosity against the Shah. All these different forms of resistance are not given more than a passing reference by Algar who seems to suggest that revolutionary Islam inspired all Iranians in their desire to remove the Shah. Because Algar ignores this aspect of the Revolution, he also does not talk about the internal struggle between the competing forces in Iran after the Revolution.

These omissions and an overall posture to defend both the ideology and actions of the religious revolutionaries of Iran make this work somewhat unreliable as pure history. It is, however, useful in order to understand the Islamic Revolutionary mindset of the ideologues and supporters of the Islamic Revolution in Iran soon after it occurred. As this revolution is perhaps the most important event in contemporary Muslim history, this book should be read by all those who want to understand the Muslim world today.

Tariq Rahman

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