

Book Reviews

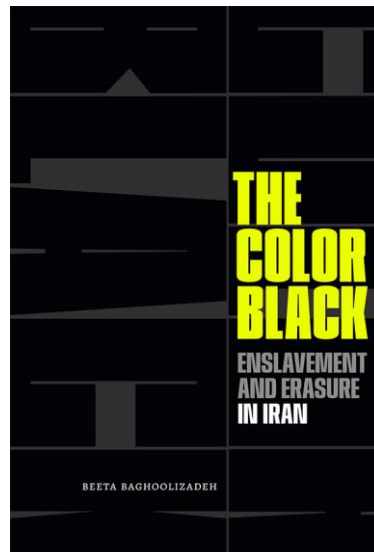
Beeta Baghoolizadeh. *The Color Black: Enslavement and Erasure in Iran*. Duke University Press, 2024. Pp. 248. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-4780-3024-9. Price: \$26.95.

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Beeta Baghoolizadeh has done an excellent job with her book *The Color Black: Enslavement and Erasure in Iran*. Her research is very meticulous, yet not conveyed in an overwhelming way loaded with information. She keeps chronology at the forefront and illustrates key messages with historical anecdotes and stories. She also mentions the same story or characters recurring throughout the book, to make it easier for the reader to keep up and remember important points.

Since this is a book about Iran, it is full of cultural references and terminology. However, Baghoolizadeh begins the book with a note on transliteration to ease the reader into the language barrier. She opted to use an easier transliteration system. Hence, her choice of transliterated words is phonetically easier for English speakers. She says, “For example, I have opted for Golestan or Haji Naneh instead of Gulistān or Hājī Nanih, for the ease of the reader. Although it is uncommon to capitalize regional ethnic and racial labels in their transliteration into English, such as Habashi or Siyah, I have opted to do so to recognize these labels and identities.”

She also provided a plethora of illustrations that played very well into the stories she told about the erasure and treatment of Black people in Iran. Approximately every chapter has a few pictures to support the subject material. Pictures were crucial to the messages in the book because of the correlation between photography and the trajectory and documentation of Black people throughout Iran’s history. For instance, “The camera’s arrival marked an important moment for the documentation of enslaved individuals. Because of their proximity to centres of power—including to Naser ed-Din Shah himself—enslaved



people were among the first generation of people photographed in Iran” (p. 48). Perhaps additional graphics would have also been useful, such as maps to show migration patterns or any graphic to visualize the information in the book. The endnotes are also very detailed and do not feel redundant, as they add important nuances to the text. An extensive bibliography indicates the extent of research done.

The Color Black has two parts each with three chapters that include clear subheadings. The book ends with an epilogue.

Baghoolizadeh’s book is not a history of enslavement or the Blacks in Iran. However, she demonstrates how the enslavement of East Africans in Iran continued throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century despite royal decrees to ban the slave trade and later by the Manumission Law of 1929 passed in the Parliament. Through her use of archives, interviews with descendants of the Black slaves and the enslavers, and the use of photographs, she aims to discredit, what she believes to be, the dominant view among scholars and the general public that Iran did not have “slaves.” She argues that there has been an erasure process in modern Iran to make them invisible, or at best marginalized. “The book is concerned with the tension between forced visibility and forced invisibility: a recent history of enslavement, one that was wielded for visual displays of power and status, was made to disappear so dramatically that even the most obvious footprints are explained away” (p. 4).

The book’s first part deals with the “Enslavement” process and its social significance. Part two deals with the “Erasure” process and its consequences.

Chapter one, “Geographies of Blackness and Enslavement,” discusses the historical context of enslavement in Iran, particularly focusing on the racialized visibility of East Africans and the impact of British abolitionist efforts in the region during the nineteenth century. British naval powers focused on abolishing the Persian Gulf slave trade, leveraging political interests and diplomatic pressures on the Qajar court to enforce bans on the sea-based trafficking of enslaved individuals. The narrative of abolitionism in the Persian Gulf region benefitted both the British and the Qajars, with British interests aligning with geopolitical strategies while the Qajars aimed to maintain domestic enslavement practices. Overall, the text shows how racialized geographies of Blackness shaped the dynamics of enslavement in Iran, highlighting the complex interplay between regional politics, international pressures, and the enduring struggle against slavery in the nineteenth century. The subsection, “Vocabulary of Racism,” offers insights into the persistence of enslavement practices among Iran’s elite, the racialized language

(*kaka siyah*, Black brother) and categorizations associated with enslavement, and the challenges posed by continued elite participation in the slave trade despite legal prohibitions. The text prompts critical reflections on the complexities of abolitionist struggles within the context of entrenched socio-economic inequalities and racial hierarchies. The author also refers to the architectural features of wealthy families that included separate quarters for enslaved and free servants, which, according to her, represented a symbolic inclusion of enslaved labour. Baghoolizadeh emphasizes public visibility and social status. Enslaved individuals were highly visible in urban spaces, often accompanying their enslavers in public and wearing distinctive clothing that signified social status. The visibility of enslaved Black individuals became a symbol of prestige for enslaving households.

Chapter two, "Limits in Family and Photography," critiques the use of the term "family" to describe the relationship between enslavers and enslaved individuals, suggesting that it denotes the household structure rather than genuine intimacy or belonging. The author maintains that enslaved individuals, particularly Black domestic workers, played a prominent role in the public representation of their enslavers. Their visibility symbolized the wealth and status of their enslavers. She explains how the camera, introduced in 1837, was embraced by royalty and eventually influenced commercial photography, impacting how enslavers depicted their families alongside enslaved individuals in portraits. It was a modern means of enslaving families to visually represent their status and wealth, often including enslaved individuals in portraits as a marker of family identity and prestige; examples of "forced visibility." The chapter examines marriage and court photography to illustrate the idealized family structure, contrasting it with the harsh realities of enslavement within households. It discusses the complexities of familial representation and the social implications of visibility for enslaved individuals in late nineteenth-century Iran. In the remaining part of the chapter, the author explores the broader cultural context surrounding photography and enslavement against the backdrop of abolitionist debates in Iran during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911). The revolution marked a significant shift, introducing democratic governance and reshaping societal norms, including gender roles and family structures among elite Iranians. The author discusses how the revolution prompted questions about societal values and the precarious position of enslaved individuals within households, reflecting broader discourses on the ideal mother and housewife. This period saw a transformation in the upbringing of

elite children, previously tended to by enslaved nannies and domestic staff, as societal debates around family dynamics evolved. Moreover, the chapter delves into narratives of enslaved individuals like Narges, highlighting the intertwining of Blackness and enslavement in Iranian society. Narges's story underscores the vulnerability faced by Black individuals, even in contexts where enslavement was legally prohibited. Despite democratic aspirations, Black women remained vulnerable to enslavement due to societal perceptions linking Blackness with servitude. Ultimately, Narges's quest for freedom, aided by figures like Haji Naneh and supported by a network of newly freed African women, exemplifies the struggle against systemic exploitation and the formation of communal bonds among enslaved individuals in Iran. The author draws parallels with broader scholarly discussions on African diasporic communities, emphasizing shared experiences of enslavement and solidarity among marginalized groups across different historical contexts.

Chapter three "Portraits of Eunuchs and their Afterlives," showcases the gradual disappearance of eunuchs from Iranian society. It reveals a glimpse into the lives of important eunuchs and the challenges they faced at Naser ed-Din Shah's court (r. 1848-1896). "Most of the eunuchs were of African ancestry and were among the last ones in Iran, due to ongoing abolition efforts," the fall of the Qajar dynasty, and the rise of the constitutionalist democratic movement. These images give us a glimpse into their lives and the challenges they faced. For example, Bashir Khan was executed by the Shah for defying orders (p. 73). After eunuchs' deaths, their wealth was often taken by the royal family, leaving little behind to remember them. These stories remind us of the difficult lives these eunuchs led, serving powerful masters but often forgotten after they passed away. Despite their importance, violence against them was tolerated, often mentioned casually in historical accounts. Eunuchs were often photographed alongside royalty, with the images serving to preserve the court's opulence. The portraits (pp. 73, 75, 77, 80) reflected a racial dichotomy, with Caucasian eunuchs described in complimentary terms while Abyssinian eunuchs faced racial stereotyping. Ultimately, these photographs were made for the benefit of the enslavers, not the enslaved themselves.

In literature and satire, eunuchs were used to critique the ruling class's cruelty and excesses rather than to symbolize power and virility. The use of eunuchs as subjects for mockery and satire was prevalent within the Qajar court itself. Court jesters like Karim Shireh-yi pioneered a form of comedy known as "siyah-bazi," or "playing Black," which drew on stereotypes of eunuchs for comedic effect. Karim Shireh-yi, also

known as “Intoxicated Karim,” was a prominent figure in Naser ed-Din Shah’s court and was given free rein to critique powerful court members through humour. His performances laid the groundwork for later troupes to engage in cavalier mimicry of Blackness, often portraying eunuchs in a derogatory manner. These performances relied on exaggerated accents, mannerisms, and physical appearances to elicit laughter from the audience. Photography became a medium through which these stereotypes were perpetuated and mocked. The humour in these performances and photographs often revolved around racial stereotypes, with Blackness being a key component. Black jesters, sometimes freedmen seeking economic opportunities, would play roles without masks, relying on their skin tone for comedic effect. Meanwhile, light-skinned Iranian clowns would often wear masks to portray enslaved eunuchs, highlighting the racial dynamics at play in these performances.

Photographs of the clown “eunuchs” in group settings reveal more about the role of race in the humor. In one photograph (fig. 3.10), three men sit on a bench, each playing specific characters: a Black eunuch, a Black king, and a white eunuch. The Black “eunuch” did not wear a mask. The jester’s own Blackness sufficed to play the role. Instead, he held a wide-eyed expression that conjured similar imagery from American minstrelsy performances. His expression, coupled with his plain uniform, made his role as a eunuch recognizable and clear. The white eunuch, however, is wearing a papier-mâché mask similar to the one discussed in figure 3.9. His long, thin nose and wide, droopy eyes all represent a caricatured Caucasian eunuch. (p. 87)

Despite the crude stereotypes perpetuated by these performances, they played a significant role in shaping cultural memory and perception of enslaved eunuchs. Figures like Haji Firuz, once respected members of the court, became the subjects of vulgar comedies and eventually faded into obscurity, their legacy overshadowed by caricatures and mockery.

Part two of the book is all about the “erasure” and “forced invisibility” of the Blacks and enslaved in modern Iran. In chapter four, Baghoolizadeh strongly criticizes the Pahlavi’s modernizing cultural policies under Reza Shah (r. 1925-1941), and Muhammad Reza Shah (r. 1941-1979). She believes that the Manumission Law of 1929 marked the beginning of abolition in Iran but was more of an erasure than a true liberation, a symbolic step towards modernization and alignment with Western values during Reza Shah’s reign. Freed people often remained in servitude-like conditions, and their status did not fundamentally change. The law did not provide compensation or reparations, and the trajectory of their post-abolition lives remains largely undocumented. She rightly states that all individuals living in Iran received citizenship almost

immediately after the abolition. However, the citizenship of freed people, she states, was sometimes marred by racial slurs disguised as family names, reflecting ongoing racial prejudices. Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah introduced revisionist narratives of race and enslavement, minimizing or ignoring Iran's history of slavery. References to slavery were removed from textbooks and sources of knowledge and replaced by narratives focused on other countries' experiences with slavery, particularly Black Americans. Iranians in the 1960s and 1970s became familiar with US civil rights and Black Power movements through various media, including newspapers and translations of Malcolm X's autobiography. The Iranian press highlighted Malcolm X's image as a righteous Muslim revolutionary, resonating with Iranians who viewed him as akin to Bilāl b. Rabāḥ, a freed Abyssinian slave and companion of Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). Malcolm X's popularity in Iran endured, with translations of his autobiography and other African American literature. Iranian revolutionaries of 1979 framed him as an icon of racial justice within an Islamic context, as evidenced by the issuance of a postage stamp in his honour in 1984. Enslavement and its legacies were largely understood in Iran as an American phenomenon, with Pahlavi-era textbooks omitting Iran's history of slavery and its participation in the transnational slave trade. Consequently, Malcolm X became idealized in Iran, while events like exhibitions on Black African art in Tehran, sponsored by Queen Farah Diba in 1977, framed the history of enslavement as foreign, not Iranian. Baghoolizadeh inspects Majles's (the Parliament) records of debates about the abolition law, Persian lexicons produced in the same era, and architectural and urban designs under the Pahlavis to showcase escorted efforts for systematically erasing Black enslavement history in Iran. Overall, this chapter illustrates the complex interplay between language, politics, and geopolitics surrounding the abolition of enslavement in Iran during this period. Despite the erasure in official records, the legacy of enslavement persists in popular culture, highlighting the ongoing impact of historical injustices.

Chapter five, "Origins of Blackface in the Absence of Black People," presents the development of *Siyah-bazi* and Blackface Theater. *Siyah-bazi*, or "playing Black," is a form of minstrelsy theatre in Iran that features caricatures of Black individuals, often with exaggerated mannerisms and Blackened faces. These performances centre around a main character, the *siyah* (Black), who typically misunderstands tasks and faces comedic trials. *Siyah-bazi*'s popularity and prevalence after the 1929 Manumission Law, which abolished slavery in Iran, raise questions about its continued association with enslaved eunuchs. The genre

solidified as non-Black Iranian actors replaced freed Africans in portraying siyah characters since the 1950s. In downplaying the racist implications, some Iranian scholars and influential artists often frame Siyah-bazi performances as part of a timeless Iranian tradition. However, their use of Blackened faces serves to distinguish characters from non-Black Iranians, perpetuating racial stereotypes. A typical example is the characterization of Haji Firuz, a character associated with Nowruz celebrations, who also appeared in Blackface. His portrayal evolved, becoming more common from the mid-twentieth century onward, despite earlier references limited to court eunuchs or other enslaved men from the Persian Gulf. Satire magazines such as *Towfiq* and *Yaqut* emerged in the mid-twentieth century. These popular comical magazines that serve as a tool for political commentary without directly referencing specific governmental figures, continued the tradition of using a Blackface caricature as their mascots. Such character reflected anti-Black stereotypes and served as an active commentator on political developments, albeit for a shorter period before being shut down by the government of the time.

Haji Firuz, a character associated with Nowruz celebrations, faced increased scrutiny after the 1979 revolution. While some defended him as an ancient tradition, others viewed his portrayal as racist and incompatible with the Islamic Republic's image. With an increased global awareness of racism, the Tehran Municipality's decision to temporarily suspend Blackface performances during Nowruz sparked debates about racism and tradition in Iran. While some defended Haji Firuz as an integral part of the holiday, others supported the suspension as a step towards confronting racism. Despite discussions and temporary measures, Haji Firuz's presence remains largely unchanged, with no definitive conclusions reached regarding its racial implications. The debate highlights the complexities of addressing racism within cultural traditions.

"A genre of distortion" constitutes the content of chapter six. The author discusses how memories of enslavement are manipulated and distorted over time to serve the interests of enslavers and their descendants. The chapter explores how narratives about enslaved individuals evolve, often downplaying their status and portraying them as cherished members of the family. Four narratives of various lengths and types are examined—an academic article, two books, and an Instagram post. According to the author, these narratives rely on flawed understandings of enslavement and erase the experiences of the enslaved, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and minimizing the historical reality of enslavement. Moreover, it highlights the dominance

of enslavers' narratives in shaping historical accounts of enslavement, leading to a sanitized version of the past that absolves enslavers of racist blame. In justifying the presence of Black slaves in the Qajar royal court and other notables, prominent figures, including descendants of royal families contribute to these distortions by perpetuating narratives of benevolence and agency. They often make false equivalences or metaphorical comparisons, such as likening historical enslavement to other forms of oppression like servitude under a despot, thereby whitewashing the harsh realities of enslavement. Perhaps more difficult to accept is that such individuals use sanitized narratives of their family history to present themselves as experts on racism, leveraging supposed intimate relationships with certain enslaved individuals like their nanny or other loyal servants. Baghoolizadeh acknowledges the absence of perspectives from enslaved individuals and their descendants in mainstream historical narratives, emphasizing the need to challenge these dominant narratives and include diverse voices in discussions about enslavement. Overall, the author conveys the importance of critically examining historical narratives and recognizing the power dynamics inherent in the construction of historical memory. It calls for a more inclusive approach to history that acknowledges the experiences of the enslaved and challenges the distorted narratives perpetuated by enslavers and their descendants.

The book ends with an epilogue highlighting the post-erasure life of Black Iranians in Bushehr, a major port city in southern Iran that was once involved in the trade of goods and Black Africans into Iran. A community of Black Iranians that despite challenges, continues to maintain traditions and create new ones, resisting erasure and contributing to the community's fabric. It also presents a brief explanation of how social media empowers Black Iranians to reclaim their stories countering the discourse of erasure. Iranian social media discourse during the BlackLivesMatter protests increased interest in Black Iranian histories, prompting the launch of "The Collective for Black Iranians," founded by Black and Afro-Iranians in 2020. It amplifies Black voices and provides bilingual (English and Persian) content to celebrate Blackness. Reframing these histories is crucial to addressing erasures and writing a more accurate past that honours forgotten narratives. Baghoolizadeh finishes the book with an assertion that the work is ongoing. She writes: "I spent over half this book describing what forgetting looks like. But what can remembering look like?" (p. 161).

The author of this review could not agree more with a statement in the introduction of the book where the author fairly declares her awareness of the fact that "the history of Black or Afro-Iranians is much

more layered, much richer, and spans millennia of exchange, migration, and belonging” (p. 5). Establishing a firm thesis about the erasure of racism in Iran’s modern history equally mandates the examination of a massive number of diverse sources—including voices of the Black slaves which according to the book are not available—and needs multi-layered scholarship. Otherwise, in the end, one might remain sceptical about a determined interpretation of some of the examined materials—in the absence of cross-checking—and wonder whether they are not forced readings into them. Totalizing accounts or generalizing harsh treatments of certain cases to all Blacks living in Iran, or to all Black servants and all their masters do not do justice to the existing more nuanced narratives that reveal the other side of the dark picture. Is not ignoring them another form of “erasure” that leads to creating another imbalanced story of the Iranian Black servants/slaves?

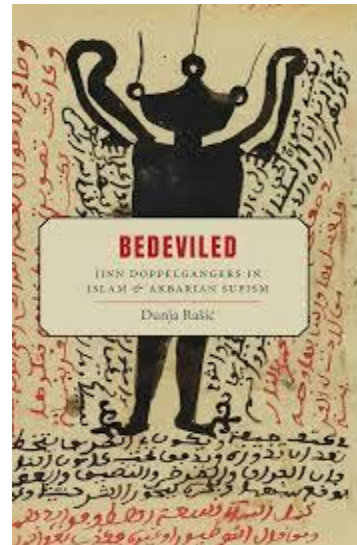
Nevertheless, *The Color Black* deserves attention for being a pioneering work on this subject which opens the way for future research, debate, and scholarship.

Forough Jahanbakhsh*

Dunja Rašić. *Bedeviled: Jinn Doppelgangers in Islam and Akbarian Sufism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2024. Pp. 220. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781438496894. Price: \$99.

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Jinn or *jinnāt* were part of my childhood. Not that I ever had met one—as far as I can tell—but my parents and my maternal relatives would talk about them, warning me not to disturb them and the places where they sleep, usually trees. There was even a family story involving a great-grandmother who, in (pre-partition) India, assisted a female *jinn* in giving birth. Then, I went to public school, where I finally was taught scientific, rational subjects, things that people can actually see: history and *the past*; mathematics and *imaginary numbers*; economics and *the invisible hand of the market*; philosophy and Descartes’s



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