

Book review

Farjami, Mahmud (2017). *Iranian Political Satirists: Experience and Motivation in the Contemporary Era*. Topics in Humour Research 5. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Because of its intrinsic associations with a people's culture, humour is a rather difficult subject for studies aimed at an international audience. Quite apart from the obvious problems associated with translation, there is the whole context of the humorous expression itself, for example, the political environment, the social values, and the assumptions made by the humourist about what his/her native audience can read between the lines (see Dolitsky 1992; Bell 2007).

The task can be even more difficult if the culture in question is an Eastern one, as the East in many ways is still a fertile soil for stereotypes and is often misunderstood by the West (see Said 2007 [1978]). When it comes to Iran, Westerners are probably more used to news concerning the tense, decade-long negotiations about the country's nuclear programme—as a quick search of *The New York Times'* website reveals—or, in the cultural field, Asghar Farhadi's recent Academy Award winners *A Separation* (2011) and *The Salesman* (2016), or Marjane Satrapi's brilliant graphic novel *Persepolis* (2007).

Against this backdrop, Mahmud Farjami accepts a double challenge. He seeks not only to introduce the reader to aspects of modern and ancient Iranian satire, but also to discover why satirists do what they do—especially in Iran, where satire may cost them their freedom, result in serious financial losses, or even threaten their lives. Instead of simply speculating, Farjami decided to interview nine prominent Iranian satirists about their motivations for producing satire under such extreme circumstances. Some of the interviews were face-to-face, others via Skype, and some had to be carried out by e-mail. The interviewees were satirists who have been in exile for decades, anonymous authors still writing under the protection of pseudonyms and others still living in Tehran.

There can be no doubt that, as the author himself writes, tolerance of satire is a reliable thermometer of a country's commitment to freedom of speech and freedom of the press (p. 4). The book opens with a dramatic example of this: the murder of Mirzadeh Eshqi in 1924 after he wrote satirical verses about the Iranian Prime Minister. As Farjami correctly points out (p. 1), he was not the first nor will he be the last to suffer the tragic consequences of mocking the regime.

The author himself is no exception. Having been a political satirist since 2002 and having acquired an in-depth practical and theoretical knowledge of the subject, with works published in Tehran's most important newspapers and his own blog, Farjami has been exiled from his country since 2010, following threats made against him and his family. He talks openly about his personal involvement with the subject of the book, including the risks taken by his family and friends to make sure some of the more than 200 books consulted for the research actually reached him.

Despite this, *Iranian Political Satirists* is neither subjective nor biased; on the contrary, Farjami does his best to make it as objective and scientific as possible while also accessible to a broader audience. The book is therefore not simply a reprint of his doctoral dissertation, but

an adaptation with new sections and even entire chapters that have been added to provide further information about the context in which Iranian satire was and is produced.

The introduction of the book includes a brief history of Iran and a short bibliography for those interested in learning more about Iranian history and culture. Chapter 2 analyses the Persian satirical tradition from the medieval era to the 19th century, explaining Arabic and Persian terms and concepts as clearly as possible. This chapter essentially shows how in the past satire was primarily a weapon of war, similar to a curse, made to belittle enemies; how it later came to be a vehicle for highly personal attacks; and how during the Constitutional Revolution of the early 20th century it became a way of expressing social criticism.

Chapter 3 moves on to describe political satire nowadays. This is no longer conveyed in court poetry but through the press, which was introduced in Iran in 1835. While there were periods of freedom of speech, such as the reign of the Mozaffar al-Din Shah Qajar (1896-1907), in general the history of the press in Iran is the history of its suppression, the struggle against this suppression, and the criticism published in the press nonetheless. According to the book, one of the last opportunities for a truly free press emerged immediately after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when more than thirty satirical newspapers appeared. However, the aggressive lampooning of the authorities, classes, and parties or even persons whom the satirists opposed, whether on the far left or the far right, was not to last long and was soon banned by a new press law a few months after the revolution. Two thirds of the satirical newspapers were closed, and many satirists were exiled. While their colleagues who did not leave Iran could not publish even the mildest criticism of the government, the exiled satirists produced extremely critical material. Although many satirists are still leaving the country, increased Internet access has led to a larger, more widespread readership for Persian satire and has made it possible for satirists working abroad to be read in Iran.

Chapters 2 and 3 were written especially for *Iranian Political Satirists*. However, although they provide context, they feel somewhat out of place as they are only loosely connected with the rest of the book. There are, for example, no comparisons between classical and present-day satirists. For those interested in Persian literature, these chapters may feel too short, while for those interested in the motivations of contemporary satirists, they may feel too long.

Having considered the context in which the study was undertaken, particularly the historical, political and literary ones, the author turns his attention to the theoretical framework for the research in Chapter 4, which is dedicated to a review of other studies on Persian satire. Farjami notes that most of these analyse only classical satire or suffer from a lack of a reliable structure and methodology. Furthermore, they do not focus on the satirists' motivations, leaving a gap that his work endeavours to fill.

Chapter 5 defines some of the concepts used in the book—satire, motivation and, of course, humour—all of which were discussed in the previous chapters but not defined. After discussing the difficulties involved in defining satire and the controversies surrounding the concept, the author concludes that the main characteristic by which it can be identified—and by which it can be distinguished from other forms of humour, such as irony and parody—is its criticism of a particular person, practice, or institution, and the underlying desire to inspire reform and change. Special attention is paid to the three main humour theories (superiority, relief, and incongruity) in order to establish a connection between them and satire.

The three theories of humour are essential to an understanding of the methodology adopted by Farjami, which is described in Chapter 6 along with short biographical notes for the nine Iranian political satirists, whose interviews were the most important source of information for the book. The main question asked during the interviews involves the satirists' motivations for writing or drawing satirical material, and was complemented by follow-up

questions about related topics, such as what they expected to achieve with their drawings or writings. The interviews, as the author explains, were open-ended to allow nuanced expression and reflection, which are not possible with other methodologies. Farjami then catalogued the satirists' answers in a table covering the three major humour theories.

A motivation related to the superiority theory, for instance, involves assuming a position of moral superiority and punishing misconduct by humiliating those responsible for it. An example of motivation related to the relief theory is the desire to provide society with relief from its anger and tension by acting as a safety valve, and an example of motivation related to the incongruity theory is perception of the gap between expectations and reality. Finally, holding certain political beliefs is an example of a motivation that does not fit into any of the previous three categories and is therefore included in a fourth one covering the remaining motivations. Although the author had humour theories in mind when formulating the questions, the theories were not expressly mentioned in the questions.

The core of the book is Chapter 7, which is discussed in the following paragraphs. This chapter seeks to answer the two main questions Farjami poses in Chapter 1: "What are the motivations in the production of political satire by individual satirists in Iran?" and "What is the most prevalent and powerful motivational factor in the production of political satire in Iran?" (p. 4). The eighth and last Chapter relates the findings of the book to other studies, responding to criticism that Iranian studies on humour are detached from international ones. In the epilogue, the author acknowledges the limitations of the study (for instance, not choosing satirists who support the regime) and makes suggestions for further research, such as studies of the links between satire and sociopolitical tensions in certain societies.

There can be no doubt that the main purpose of the book—discovering why satirists do what they do in Iran—is achieved. The common-sense idea that satirists are always driven by morality and virtue and forced by their conscience to write satire for the benefit of the nation is replaced by more down-to-earth, human reasons, ranging from anger to the need to correct a perceived wrong. There is a slight predominance of motivations related to the relief theory of humour, and in the interviews most of the satirists rejected the notion that their work intended to humiliate their targets.

While the methodology used by Farjami lends scientific rigor to the research, it also imprisons the book in a much more limited analysis. Designing a table to classify the interviewees' responses allows the author to produce statistics, but it also means that much of the material in the answers remains underused. The author has collected a wealth of material—long interviews with nine satirists—but much of it remains unexplored.

For instance, it would have been interesting to hear more from Hadi Khorsani, one of Iran's most famous satirists, who has been exiled in London for thirty years and confesses to feeling "an ethical duty" (p. 199) to keep on writing satire in order to make use of the freedom of speech he enjoys in Britain. To a certain extent, Khorsani's comments contradict the conclusions drawn in the book and tend instead to reflect the assumption that the making of satire involves issues related to morality and virtue. A similar notion emerges in the work of F. M. Sokhan, a satirist whose identity is unknown and who publishes his work, which is unpaid, under a pseudonym. This would be an interesting topic for further development.

Likewise, both Hadi Heidari and F. M. Sokhan said that they neither encourage people to act violently nor discourage it, accepting that violence may be an inevitable consequence of satire (pp. 205-206). It would therefore have been enlightening to hear what they had to say about the demonstrations that sometimes take place in Iran (especially in the case of Heidari, who was in prison when the book was written and had to apologise for a cartoon involving the army). Heidari's affiliation to a political party could also have been explored in greater depth

and the same holds for the discussion extended to cover the issue of whether neutrality and detachment are inherent to satirists' work.

I was also puzzled to learn that Abolfazl Zaruee, a critic of the regime who, according to the book, currently teaches at the Islamic Azad University and works for the Iranian popular press, has never been at odds with the authorities despite his very popular Biographies of the Officials and his monthly gathering called the Circle of Cynics.

In short, the book does indeed fill a gap in the field of humour studies and has all the rigor expected of scientific research. However, this rigor also deprives the book of some of its potential flavour. In my view, had the author investigated the world of the satirists in greater depth and focused more on the answers themselves than on classification of them, he would have painted a more accurate portrait of the struggle involved in producing satire under a repressive political regime.

Art and science operate in very different ways. It is unquestionable that Farjami knows how to undertake scientific research: his research is verifiable, follows an impeccable methodology, and reaches important conclusions. However, when it comes to the repression faced by Iranians under the Islamic regime, I was much more touched by Satrapi's (2007) black and white cartoons and their advice that "the only way to bear the unbearable is to laugh at it" (translation by the author of the review).

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