



# Persian Heritage

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# Persian Heritage

Vol. 4, No. 13

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<b>From the Editor Desk</b>	7
<b>Letters to the Editor</b>	11
<b>News Briefs/Do You Know</b>	12
<b>Commentary</b>	
<i>The Persian Gulf,</i> by Mojtabeh-Zadeh	18
<i>Human Rights and Religion,</i> by Babanouri	22
<i>The Persian American, A Native American View,</i> by David Yeagley	26
<i>The Rise of Alternative Medicine,</i> by Amir Harandi	30
<b>Your Persian Heritage</b>	
<i>Moelana Jalal-I-Din Mohammad Balkhi, Known as Rumi,</i> by F. A. Sadeghpour	32
<i>My Children or My Career,</i> by Lisa Daftari	39
<i>Shirin Neshat: A Rebel With a Cause,</i> by Shadbanou Mirfendereski-Sheybani	40
<i>Khayyam, The Forgotten Persian Poet for Seven Centuries,</i> by Michael F. Maltese	43
<i>Iran At The Crossroads,</i> by Yahya R. Kamalipour	44
<b>The Arts</b>	
<i>Siavash Pays a Second Visit to His Father's Seraglio,</i> by P.M. Ansari, M.D.	48
<i>Captivity,</i> by David Yeagley	50
<i>Poetry</i>	58
<i>Book Reviews</i>	59
<i>Movie Reviews</i>	56
<b>Feature</b>	
<i>Noe-Rouz, Glory of Spring,</i> by F.A. Sadeghpour	60
<i>Noe-Rouz,</i> by Mahvash Amir-Mokri	62
<b>Outside Your Heritage</b>	
<i>Theater Review</i>	66

## From the Editor's Desk

What should my topic be for the Noe Rouz issue of *Persian Heritage*? This was my thought while rushing to the airport to catch a flight. "This marks the fourth year of *Persian Heritage*." The staff certainly wants to thank its faithful readers for their continuous support of this magazine. I, of course, want to extend a personal thank you to my editorial board for their tireless efforts and words of encouragement, especially when I doubted the magazine's future. So, we say thank you and may we all see a New Year filled with good health, peace and prosperity.

Well, I did catch my flight and my breath. As I snuggled into my seat my eyes caught the headline of the in-flight magazine, "*Human Rights 1948 to 1998, Human Rights for all.*" The cover featured pictures of Kofi Annan, The Secretary General of The United Nations, Mary Robinson, President of Ireland, Robert Badinter former Secretary of Justice of France and Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize winner. The magazine discussed the 50th anniversary of Human Rights and the 30 Articles contained in the *Declaration of Human Rights*. Kofi Annan stated, "Human rights belong to all people and no government or state has the right to take these basic rights and freedoms away from the people. Human rights are universal and not strange to any culture or nation." As I read the *Declaration*, I noted that some of the articles to be more powerful than others, for example, Article 3 states everyone's basic right to live, be free and have personal security, and Article 5 prohibits acts of torture and cruel and unusual punishment on the human body. No State or Government should be allowed to practice some and ignore the rest. The *Declaration* is a complete package and must be applied in its entirety to achieve results.

Tribute was made to Nelson Mandela who after suffering in a prison for 28 years (in the name of human rights) in 1994, was elected President of South Africa. Special attention was also given to Robert Badinter for his removal of the emergency courts, recognition of oppressed people and removal of the death penalty. I was emerged and fascinated by the article, but fatigue caught up with me. I drifted off to

sleep. Sometime later I was jolted awake by a dream. My awakening was so severe that I disturbed the slumber of the passengers around me. I was shaking, sweaty and pale. In my dream, I was enjoying the achievements I had read in the article; people, after so many years of pain and suffering, were now enjoying their freedom to speak without fear of repercussion and were able to live without the fear of being tortured. My children, American born, then entered the room. We started to discuss the article. Suddenly they began to question me on the events in Iran that had occurred over the previous three weeks: a husband and wife slaughtered to death and writers disappeared or succumbed to strange diseases. Their crimes? ... Speaking out against inequality, torture and dictatorship and supporting the need for freedom of speech and the protection of life and limb. My children criticized me and my birth land for allowing these things to happen. They could not understand how these atrocities could occur. "How," they asked, "could a country persecute people for their views? Here we are impeaching the President, yet people speak out for and against him without fear of losing their life." What they were saying disturbed me but what disturbed me more was their lack of understanding of circumstances outside of this country. They had grown up in an environment where it is acceptable to speak out freely against a government. They could not comprehend that elsewhere in the world, especially in this day and age, others continued to be forbidden to speak out for their beliefs. For the first time, I felt a distance between us, a cultural gap.

For once in my life I was without words. I could offer them no explanation to help them understand. My children did not understand who or what I was. They could not understand that even though it has been forty years since I left Iran, I still carry Iran's soil in my heart and continue to feel the pain of the present injustices that plague it. They could not understand my inner turmoil. I am divided emotionally and mentally between two countries, the one of my roots and the one I have called home for the past forty years.

This I know is difficult for most to understand unless you have left the soil of your birth. My children not understanding, however, was incomprehensible. The pain of this was so severe that I was jolted from my deep sleep.

This incident refreshed a memory of my youth. When we, as children, failed to behave, our nanny would tell us that the "punk" also known as the Jinn and goblin, would come and take us. The thought of this creature taking me away terrorized me. One night I had a nightmare. The punk jinn goblin was in my room and was trying to grab me. I awoke from my sleep screaming, frightened, sweaty and pale, the same way as in my recent dream. To comfort me, my nanny searched the room for the punk jinn goblin. After a moment or two she assured me that he was gone. She then placed a pair of scissors under my pillow to keep the punk jinn goblin away.

Alas... I am sure that my children would not understand my fear of the punk jinn goblin. In fact explaining the story of the punk jinn goblin to them is as useless and meaningless as trying to explain the policy on human rights practiced within Iran and against Iran. Yes... it has been forty years since my departure, and yes I still feel the pain and torture she suffers, and yes... I will carry those emotions with me for the rest of my life and into eternity, and yes... I am certain that many will not understand my position and yes... I now know that is OK.

Shahrokh Alavi

# The Persian Gulf

A letter to the Cambridge Concise Encyclopedia



Part 2

by: Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh  
University of London

Towards the end of the 4th century, geographical studies gained more accuracy as the term "Persian Gulf" and "Sea of Oman" appear in the maps of this period, as the two inland arms of the great Persian Sea. The most notable example of this period is Maqdasī al-Beshari who considers the Persian Gulf and the Oman Sea as parts of the Persian Sea (10). It is worth noting that instead of "Persian Sea", the term "Ajam Sea" appears in many works of geography of this period. Ajam is another term used by early Arab geographers/historians in reference to Iran. Maqdasī identifies the Ajam waters of the world as seven seas, while attributing the body of water extending from Yemen to Abadan, to Persia. He asserts;

"Most people call it Persian Sea from about Yemen, and verily most of its ship-builders and ship-sailers are Persians and it is from Oman to Abadan"(11).

Another renowned geographer of this period is Abu Rayhan Biruni whose famous book "At-Tafhim" also considers the Persian Sea to include

the Oman Sea as well as the Persian Gulf (see map 5).

Arabic works of geography from the sixth century of Hejrah are less legend oriented and more inclined to the real geography. It is in this period that the ancient Greek term "Sinus Persicus" reappears in Arabic and Islamic geographical studies, in the form of the Arabic term "Al-khalij al-Farsi" or the "Persian Gulf".

A notable geography book of this century is "Tabaie al-Hayawan" of Sharaf oz-Zaman Taher Marvazi (516 AH). The term "Persian Gulf" appears in page 16 of this book and it seems to be the first reference of its kind in this century. In spite of the re-emergence of the ancient name of this Gulf, usage of the term "Persian Sea" continues until the tenth century of Hejrah.

Sharif al-Edrisi, one of the most notable geographers of the sixth century speaks of the "Persian Sea" in his book "Nezhat al-Moshtaq" with the same description as used in the previous century. The most famous Islamic geographer of the seventh century was Yaqut Bin Homawi who described the Persian Sea in his book

"Mojam al-Boldan" as a branch of the Indian Sea and emphasizes that it is named after Persia(12).

Another famous geographer of this century was Zakaria Qazvini, who has used both terms "Persian Sea" and "Persian Gulf" (13). A map appearing on page 13 of Qazvini's book "Athar al-Belad", shows the Persian Gulf in the center of the world, flanked by the "Green Gulf", or the China Sea on the left, and the "Barbari Gulf", or the Red Sea, on the right.

Of notable Islamic and Arab geographers of the eighth century, one was Shams od-Din Ad-Dameshqi (d. 727 AH), who has also used both terms the "Persian Gulf" and the "Persian Sea" in his book "Nokhbat ad-Dahr". Abu Hafz Zein od-Din Ibn Al-Wardi (d. 749 AH), used, in his book, the term "Persian Sea", describing it as a branch of the Indian Sea;

"A chapter on the Persian Sea and the islands and the strange things therein, and it is called the "Green Sea", and it is a branch of the great Indian Sea, and it is blessed with many

goodnesses and is always safe..."

Of the ninth century of Hejrah Arab geographers, Abi al-Abbas Al-Qal-qashandi (d. 821 AH) also used the term Persian Sea, describing it as a branch of the Indian Sea;

"From the Indian Sea two great and famous seas branch out and they are the Persian Sea and the Barbari Sea..."(15).

As from AH tenth century until this century, the term "Persian Sea" gradually gives way in the Arab and Islamic literatures of Geography, to the term "Persian Gulf" (see maps 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20 from different Arab countries in the 20th century, as some examples of the term "Persian Gulf" used by Arab scholars in our contemporary period).

Georgi Zeidan, a highly respected Arab historian of our time, states in his very valuable "Tarikh at-Tamaddon al- Eslami = History of Islamic Civilization" that the term "Persian Sea" used to have common usage among Arab historian/geographers of the 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th centuries, a term applying to the entire body of water surrounding the Arab world;

"The Persian Sea, to them (early Arab geographers) this sea extended to all waters surrounding the Arab lands, from the estuary of the Tigris in Iraq until Ilah, and it included all that we now know as the Persian Gulf, Arab Sea, Gulf of Aden, Red Sea, and Gulf of Aqaba"(16).

Al-Monjed, the most famous encyclopedia of the Arab world, has used the term "Persian Gulf" from its earliest editions. Apart from all these, the works of the early Arab geographers are uniquely interesting as they are the only sources which tell us of the reasons that the Arabs have named the Gulf, separating the Iranian Plateau from the Arabian Peninsula, as "The Persian Sea" of the early Islamic centuries, later to be modified by their postdecessors into the term "Persian Gulf".

Examples;

Ibn Rasteh of the 3rd century of Hejrah asserts;



Map 6- The world according to Zakaria Qazvini. "Khalij Fars" or the Persian Gulf appears in the center of the map, slightly to the left.

This sentence clearly implies that the geographical position of the Gulf, being shaped "towards Persia" is the reason for it being named after Persia.

Perhaps the best explanation given as to the reason for the Arabs to name this sea after Fars or Persia is provided by Ibn Huqal al-Baghdadi of AH 4th century;

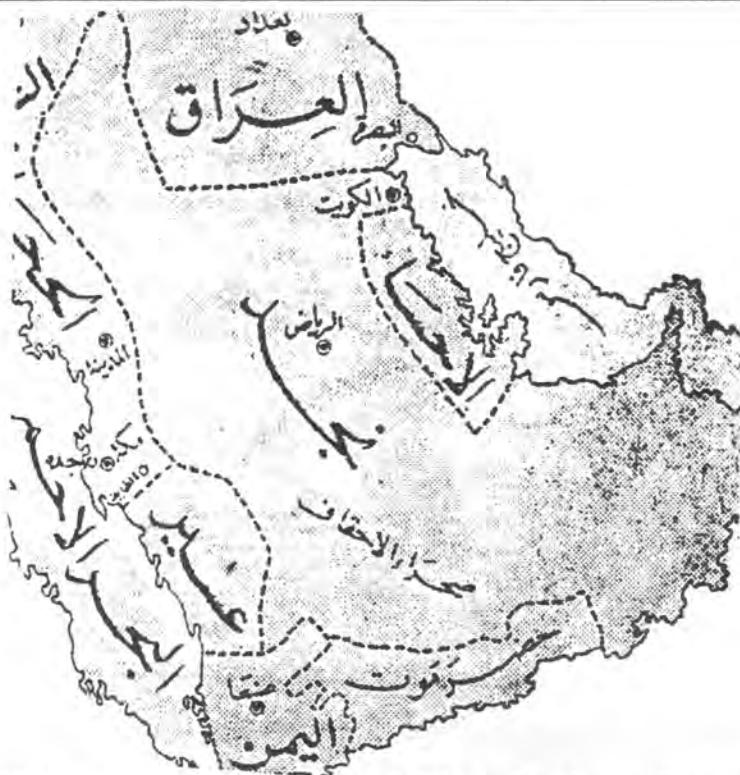
"We have repeatedly stated that the Persian Sea in a gulf from the ocean surrounding the world, branching out of it around China and the town of Waqq, and this sea extends from the lands of Sind and Kerman to Fars, and from among other lands it is named after Fars (Persia) because Persia is more developed than all other countries and its kings had the strongest control (sovereignty) in the old time, even now they control all coasts of this sea both near and far, and of all lands of Persia and others, we do not know of a single ship sailing through the Persian Sea, going out of the limits of their country and returning in safety and glory, but those from Persia".



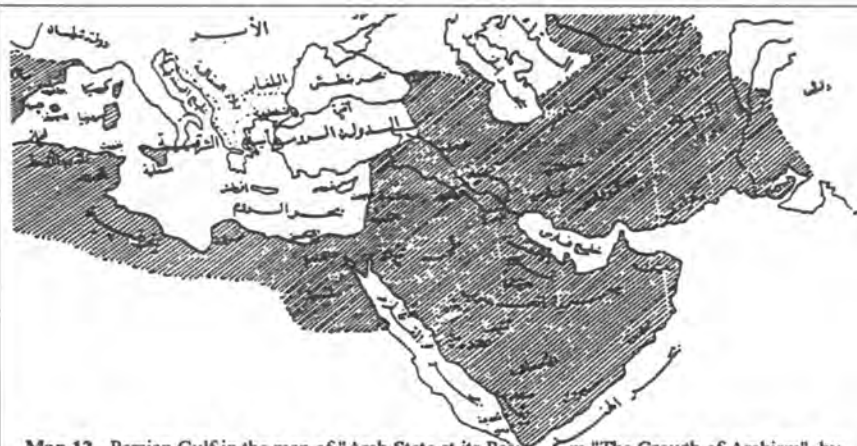
Map 13 - Persian Gulf in the map of Bahrain, from the business directory "The Arabic Directory", Beirut, 1966.

In his book "Ahsan at-Taqasim Fi Marefat al-Aqalim", Maqdasi al-Beshari of AH 4th century says;

"If it is said as to why have I considered the Ajam (Persian) waters as seven seas, after having said that verily the almighty had addressed them to what was known (meaning the two great seas referred to in the holy Koran), the answer is that there are two reasons: one is



Map 15 - Persian Gulf in the map of "The Arab World, from "Arab Legacy in Science and Philosophy", by Dr. Kamal al-Yazi & Dr. Tun Ghatas Karam, Vol. I, Beirut, 1970.



Map 12 - Persian Gulf in the map of "Arab State at its Peak", from "The Growth of Arabism", by Sobhi Abdol-Karim & Mohammad Shafiq Gharbal, Cairo, 1965.

that if the Arabs went to Persia, they would not see but what Omar Ben Khattab has said, that verily I have learned justice from Kesra (Khosro Anushervan) and praised his glory and good manners: the other reason is that whoever goes to Hagar (Bahrain) and Abadan, finds no alternative "From the Indian Sea a gulf branches out towards the region of Fars (Persia) named The

Persian Gulf".

but crossing the Persian Sea and Tiz Makran. Don't you see that most people call it, as from Yemen, the Persian Sea, and that most ship-builders and ship-sailers of it are Persians, and it is from Oman to Abadan with narrow width...".

Arab scholars of our time have also made special references to the name of the Gulf as being the "Persian Gulf".

Examples;

In his book, "Les Princes de Lor Moir" (Paris 1968), Ali Homaidan made a point in using the term "Persian Gulf" throughout the book. Subsequently, *The Times* of London expressed hopes, in an article on September 26, 1968, that other Arab writers would follow the example of this fair and just researcher and would refrain from the unfair attempt in changing the name of the Persian Gulf which has been so for centuries.

The Action Tunisian daily, published, in February 1969, an article under the title "which one of these two terms is correct", in which, after reviewing the history of the Persian Gulf, the term "Persian Gulf" was introduced as being the "correct" and "authentic" name. Dr. Seyyed Mohammad Nufel of Egypt, Under-Secretary General of Arab League, who represented Egypt in the 1968 human rights conference of Tehran, said in an interview;

"I would denounce the efforts used in changing the name of the Persian Gulf into Arabian Gulf, and would condemn these efforts".

He continued saying that in his book on the region of the Persian Gulf, published in 1952, he used the term "Persian Gulf". Finally, this author wishes to conclude this discussion by drawing the attention of the readers to the following quotation from Qadri Qoljaci, an Arab thinker-writer, who wrote an article, which appeared in daily Ar-Rased of Beirut in November 1968, under the title of "Vision of Peace in the Cradle of Islam";

"Iran is a friendly government and a brotherly nation... Our differences with it on the Persian Gulf being Arabic is no more than our differences on the nationality of Ibn Muqaffa... Ibn Sina... Isfahani... etc., who were from the Iranian branch and grew in the Islamic environment".

PH



**SHIRIN NESHAT:**

# A REBEL WITH A CAUSE

*By: Shadbanou Mirfendereski-Sheybani*

Shirin Neshat is one of the most important Iranian artists working today. Her images create a conceptual dialogue that visually identifies the realities behind the Islamic stereotypes and explores the identities of the Islamic population, in particular Islamic women.

Her work has been included in the 1995 Venice Biennial, 1995 and 1997 Istanbul Biennials and 1996 Sydney Biennial. She has been featured in group and solo exhibitions across the United States, Europe, in South Africa and Japan. Her images have been acquired by Wolfgang Gurlitt Museum, Linz, Austria; Fundacio "La Caixa," Barcelona, Spain; Musee National d'Art Moderne, Luxembourg, and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain. Her most recent video installation, "Turbulent," 1998 was featured in a solo exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris in New York and the Tate Gallery in London, England. A book of her photographs, Shirin Neshat, published by Marco Noire Editore, Turin, Italy, will be available in the United States in January, 1999.

As Hamid Dabashi, professor of Iranian studies at Columbia University, writes, "Neshat's bodily portrayals of the Islamic woman is an unwritten chronicle of a mute and concealed femininity. The enduring assumptions of what constitutes an "Islamic woman" are at once domestic to that culture and colonially crafted on it. Neshat's images manage to target both of these divergent yet colliding gazes, speaking two counter-Truths to two powers—one colonial, the other patriarchal. Precisely in this role lies the energetic charge of Neshat's subversive gaze."

Neshat claims her place as a contemporary artist through her use of mixed-media, cross-disciplinary approaches and postmodern treatment of her subject. She depicts complex political, social, psychological and spiritual concepts in concise minimalist compositions. However, always with an eye towards aesthetics, Neshat also belongs to the old-

fashioned school of artists who believe in the coexistence of form and content, style and substance. Her lyrical, multi-layered works elevate allegory into images of the surreal.

Shirin Neshat was born in Qazvin. In 1974 she came to the United States to pursue her studies at University of California, Berkeley and in 1982 received her Masters in Fine Arts. A year later, she moved to New York City where she still makes her home base.

In 1990 Neshat returned to Iran after an absence of twelve years and has continued to travel to Iran on a regular basis. Her work has evolved around her personal interest in coming to terms with the "new" Iran, to understand ideas behind Islamic ideology and to reconnect with her own past.

Many of the images in Neshat's work are self-portraits, yet their function is far from the traditional meditation on the self. Neshat uses herself much as an actress does, taking on the role of women living under the Islamic code.

In "Unveiling", the series of images made in 1993, Neshat focuses on the topic of the chador in relation to the female body and the notion of the visible and the invisible. She manages to "reveal" the Islamic woman without violating her bodily codes by bringing the parts of the female body that are allowed to be seen according to Islamic regulations together with the chador and the text. The Islamic designs and the text rendered in Persian calligraphy are applied onto the developed photographs, at times identifying, at times decorating the Woman, and creating the illusion that her thoughts and feelings have seeped not only into her expression and gaze, but also onto her skin in invisible ink that the lens renders visible.

"Birthmark" and "Identified" are re-introductions of the "oriental" woman in her modern state. No longer nude or wrapped in exotic fabric as she was by Delacroix or Matisse, but enveloped in a chador, her face remains beautiful and innocently child-like. The idealized

image, however, is Neshat's point of departure. The image of a veiled woman, her hands covering her mouth, is that of a silenced one, undeniable in her sullenly suppliant gaze. The text inscribed on her hand speaks the scant identity she is allowed--the year of her birth, her religion, her father's name.

"Identified" is a similar portrait of a veiled woman. Her hands partially covering her face are inscribed with the statistics that identify her in the Muslim society-- "woman", "married", "mother". Unlike in "Birthmark", however, the woman's gaze is the antonym of the text. Her eyes are coy and sensual, tinged with apprehension as if she is about to be found out, or break into laughter at an inappropriate moment. Her gaze, profoundly out of sink with the impersonal text on her skin, charges the image with the tension of mute rebellion. In "Untitled", a simultaneously feminist and unabashedly sensuous image, the close-up of a woman's hand touching her mouth emphasizes it as an erogenous zone, as well as, the source of the text. The poem by Forough Farukhzad is a requiem for female emotional and sexual desires.

No one is thinking about the flowers

no one is thinking about the fish  
no one wants to believe  
that the garden is dying

that the garden's heart has swollen  
under the sun

is slowly forgetting its green  
moment

The series, "Women of Allah," 1994, is more intense in content and complex in form. Neshat's most controversial images directly confront and repudiate the colonial image of the Muslim woman as exotic possession, erotic object and submissive creature of western fiction. In the title photograph, the image of a group of veiled women sitting before a nineteenth century European landscape painting-- a literal and symbolic embodiment of Iran's fascination with the Occident-- is suggestive of a harem. Glazed with sorrow, the wide range of the women's facial expressions--defiance,

resignation, pensiveness, sweetness, flirtation, anger, ennui, makes for a rich tapestry of human emotion as well as fracture the absurd uniformity projected onto Muslim women by the colonial gaze.

Some of the images in "Women of Allah" are plays on shape and form. In "Emerging in Trance", women's hands transform themselves into a pattern suggestive of the circle of existence. The image evokes the beauty and harmony of designs in Islamic architecture while integrating the female into her culture as she appropriates its art with her body.

The majority of the series focuses on the concept of Shahadat.

"These images aren't validations or justifications of shahadat," explains Neshat. They visualize the personal and public lives of women living under extreme religious commitment. The martyr stands at a peculiar intersection of love, politics and death. She commits a crime, dies because of her spiritual conviction. The images bring to the forefront the issue of violence in relation to politics, feminism and religion."

"Speechless", one of Neshat's most famous images, depicts half of a woman's face, a silver of the ever-present chador. The woman's gaze, soulful and melancholy, is in juxtaposition with the gun protruding from the shadowy space between her face and the fabric. The gun just below her ear, abstracted in close-up, suggests an earring, thus symbolizing the violence which has become feminized on psychological, political and religious levels.

"Allegiance with Wakefulness", is an image of a woman's bare soles holding between them the barrel of a gun. The poignancy of the text serves the reverse of the feminist poetry in the Unveiling series. It remains integral to the work as identifier and "voice"; however, here, it softens the image. The poetry which covers the soles of the Woman's feet is by the Islamic poet, Tahereh Saffarzadeh, who speaks of the glory of shahadat.

You, who has forsaken your life  
in your warm hands take mine  
I am your poet

and with this broken body of mine  
come to join you

You, who has forsaken your life  
existence without Faith is a kind of  
death

The potency of these images stems from not masculinizing, or obscuring the female, but celebrating her femininity while placing it side by side with traits often labeled as masculine. Neshat integration of aggression and the phallic with the feminine is in the best of feminist tradition; no matter how disturbing some of the Islamic woman's traits, she is complex, self-contradictory and human.

In her most recent works, Neshat enriches her images with the use of sound and motion as she continues to explore the Islamic identity. The video installation, "The Shadow Under the Web", 1997, visualizes the concept of spatial divisions designed to lift personal and individual desire from the public domain and contain it within private spaces. Ultimately, men dominate the public places while women exist for the most part, in private spaces. As a woman crosses into public she obliterates her sexuality and individuality behind the chador or the Islamic uniform. In essence, she continues to segregate herself.

"The Shadow Under the Web", consists of four images, showing simultaneously in large scale a woman's figure, enveloped in a black chador, running in slow motion against the stoic architecture of a mosque, a dense bazaar, lonely alleyways and abandoned ruins of a wall. Her frail moving figure is in direct juxtaposition with the imposing edifices of history and authority of the male domain. The fact that her point of departure or destination is never clear increases the urgent immediacy of the work. The accompanying soundtrack of rhythmical breathing is suggestive of anxiety and exhaustion as the woman moves through the alien spaces, altering them as they affect her in a journey whose beginning and end are as obscure to her as they are to the viewer.

Neshat's most recent video installation, "Turbulent" 1998, explores the relationship between gender and music. The piece was inspired by a young blind girl whom the artist encountered on a visit to Istanbul. She

was one of many migrant workers from the provinces, trying to earn a living in the city. Neshat saw her singing on a street corner to an off-tune electrical keyboard, played by an older man. Her penetrating voice as she performed with closed eyes, without a formal stage or audience, reminded the artist of the predicament and isolation of female singers in Iran.

The installation consists of two monitors projected simultaneously on opposite walls. On one monitor, a veiled woman waits on a stage, facing an empty auditorium. On the other monitor, a man appears to an all male audience on the stage of the same auditorium. He and his audience are dressed alike. He stands with his back to them, facing the camera, in effect, representing the group. He sings a traditional song about divine love by Jalal-ed-Din Rumi. When the man's performance ends, our attention shifts to the woman who steps from the shadows to respond. She sings a wordless song. In a mesmerizing performance, she vocalizes sounds reminiscent of primeval calls and mystical trances. On one level "Turbulent" is suggestive of a romantic duet, telling of the natural connection between men and women, the yin and yang that in spite the restrictions imposed by societal and religious codes, come together to form a whole. On another level, the piece is about duality. The man's song speaks the traditional codes. He exercises the present tense by reiterating the conventions of the past. The woman's song is unidentifiable, universal. She lives the present tense through the timelessness of the primal and the spiritual.

As Dabashi states, "Neshat's provocative vision freezes a moment of enduring reflection on what it means to be a woman, a man, to be modern, anti-modern, premodern."

In addition, more than reciprocating the received parameters of the colonial and patriarchal conception of woman, Neshat anticipates the terms of future liberation.

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## Khayyam, The Forgotten Persian Poet for Seven Centuries

By: Michael F. Maltese

Most Americans regard Ferdowsi and Hafez as the most well known classical Persian poets.

After all, Hakim Abol-Ghasem Ferdowsi Toosi (940-1020), is considered to be the foremost Iranian epic poet. Author of the *Shahnameh* ("Book of Kings"), a poem of nearly 60,000 verses, Ferdowsi vivified tales of heroism dating back from mythical times until the seventh century. Further, this culmination was compiled over the span of some thirty years, and Ferdowsi is accredited with resurrecting the Iranian heritage and language after some four centuries of destructive and tyrannical rule.

Similarly, Shams-ad-din

Mohammad, better known by his pen name Hafez ("the one who knows the Koran by heart"), became the only other Persian Poet who shared such immense success and notoriety. Born in Shiraz, Hafez (1330-1390) mastered the ghazal, a poetic arrangement anywhere from seven to fifteen verses, which contained his name in the final line. Hafez's popularity, however, stemmed from his employment of simple and sometimes musical lyrics which lent itself freely to all in Persian speaking lands, educated or not.

Abu al-Fath Omar ben Ibrahim al Khayyam (1048-1122) shared neither such literary accolades, nor such poetic notoriety during his lifetime. Actually,

Khayyam's greatest accomplishments, until Edward Fitzgerald translated his poems in 1859, pertained to his discovery of a geometrical approach to solving cubic equations by intersecting a parabola with a circle.

Under the pedagogy of Imam Mowaffak of Niashapur, Khayyam showed uncanny wit and scientific potential. His work in astronomy and mathematics gained him renown throughout the West during the Middle Ages. One of the eight top scholars chosen by Malik Shah to consult on the reformation of the calendar, Khayyam introduced the Jalali era and measured the length of a year as 365 days with refulgent precision. In mathematical circles, Khayyam was highly regarded for his work on both Pascal's triangle and the application of quadratic and linear solving methods which appeared in Euclid's *Elements*.

In 1122, Khayyam died in Nishapur, where he was born, and so did his writings, which remained almost completely unknown until some seven hundred and twenty-seven years later when Edward Fitzgerald translated approximately 600 brief, quatrain poems. Fitzgerald (1809-1883), a graduate of Cambridge University, who kept such company as Thackeray, Tennyson and Carlyle, meticulously translated *The Rubaiyat*, written by Khayyam in 12th century Persian, into English. The product of his labor was published in an anonymous pamphlet in March 1859, and finally caught the winds of popularity when Rossetti and Swinburne lifted it out of obscurity in 1860.

In *The Rubaiyat*, a compilation of nearly 150 Persian quatrains, Khayyam masterfully enacted a rhyme in which the first, second and fourth ten syllable line in the quatrain ended with the same sound. *The Rubaiyat begins:*

Awake! for morning in the bowl of night,

Has flung the stone that puts the stars to flight:

And Lo! the hunter of the east has caught

The Sultan's turret in a noose of light.

As a result of the initial translation from Persian to English, *The Rubaiyat's* popularity ascended significantly propelling its translation into over forty languages.



# NOE ROUZ GLORY OF SPRING

By: F.A. Sudeghpour

In the fall of 1996 issue of *Persian Heritage*, an article appeared entitled "Mehr'gaun". In this article, I briefly touched upon "Noe Rouz" which celebrates the coming of spring by nations of Aryan heritage or Iranians. (When we speak of Iranian nations, we include nations that have a common foundation, language and history). We can safely mention countries from east to west beginning with Tajikistan, the land of Keepers of the Crown, to Azerbaijan (Aran) Republic. Those of Aryan heritage include Kurds, in any country in which they reside, Afghans, Belouch, whether in present Iran or Pakistan, and the multitude of Parsees in India.

Before the four seasons became part of the present calendar, there were two seasons which ancient Iranians celebrated. These were "Zayana" or winter, of which

Mehr'gaun was its festival, and "Hama", summer, celebrated by the festival of Noe Rouz to announce its coming.

In order to understand why Noe Rouz and Mehr'gaun have held their status as the two most important festivals of the vast Iranian nations, we must first go back to prehistoric centuries. In ancient times, the climate of our northern hemisphere was not as it is today, therefore, our forebears had only two major seasons. Spring and summer only lasted two to three months, and the rest of the year was winter. Gradually the climate became more temperate. Noe Rouz occurs exactly when the length of night and the length of day are equal. Of course here, we must mention that the most correct calendar is the Iranian calendar which calculates the days and months in the solar calendar.

A real year is 365 days, five hours, 48 minutes and 64 seconds. "Noe" in the Persian language means "now". In the old Persian language this was pronounced "new". "Rouz" means "day", and in old Persian language this was pronounced "rouzh", then "rouch" and now "rouz". Hence, "Noe Rouz" means "new day" or "new year". In the Christian calendar, Noe Rouz falls either on March 20 or 21st which is the very first day of the spring season.

The ancient Iranians believed that mankind has a lofty rank- almost a deity that is considered the masterpiece of physical creation, and the representative of the Creator in this vast universe. According to this philosophy, any character that is noble and virtuous in mankind has been bestowed upon us by God. It is the manifestation of the Heavenly spirit or soul in a terrestrial body which gives man a temporary presence on earth. The spirit or soul which is a gift of God is called "Far'vahar" who enters the body of the embryo in the womb of the mother instilling life. Therefore, each living person possesses a part of the Divine Power in himself/herself which in turn considers mankind to be an integral part of the Omnipotent Creator, and an illumination of the Divine and everlasting Light. Hence, the eternal flame is the reminder of the Light.

In the ancient Iranian culture, the reason given for the creation of mankind was to practice and spread absolute goodness not only among themselves but other lands or races as well. An Iranian had a responsibility to struggle against vice and evil in order to provide and maintain peace and tranquility in the world. While a person lives, Far'vahar protects the body and sees that the person associates with goodness and good deeds. Then after the death of the person, Far'vahar returns to its origin, the ever-present Divine See. It will not forget nor will cut its ties with its terrestrial shell. On the contrary once a year Far'vahar descends upon the dwellings of descendants on March

15th and lingers there until March 24th to check upon the happiness, cleanliness, and the virtues of the living. For this reason, the descendants of the deceased, a month before Noe Rouz are busy cleaning the household, obtaining new garments and shoes, so that the Far'vahar of their departed can see that the descendants are happy and prosperous. They believed that the Far'vahar would rejoice in their feast, and when they return to Heaven, they will be happy for one more year.

One of the most important reasons that the first month of the new year is called Far'vadeen is for the descent of the Far'vahars. In order to stay virtuous and kind, Iranians believed one needs a strong body to host the Spirit of God properly. In order to achieve this, a child from the age of seven would learn horsemanship, archery, wrestling, and sword play. When the Iranians were defeated by Alexander, they made sure that it would never happen again. The proof is that in over seven hundred years of encounters with the Roman Empire, out of twenty-six wars, the Iranians were victorious twenty-three times. These encounters occurred during the Parthian and Sassanid dynasties.

From strength emanates virtue  
For from weakness you grow  
fickle and untrue.

Avesta--

During the Sassanid Dynasty (226-652 A.D.), the first days of Noe Rouz, the king would be attentive to the nobles and army personnel. The second five days, he would attend to all the people. The king would pardon prisoners, and give presents and new clothing to the poor and needy. On the first day of Noe Rouz, the king would don new raiment made of silk, and alone would sit upon the throne in the receiving hall or throne room. The chief magus would enter with novitiates carrying a tray. Upon the tray, were a gold chalice of red wine, a bejeweled ring, one gold sovereign, a bunch of myrtle, a sword, a bow and arrow, a pen and an inkwell. Waiting in the palace, there would also be a white horse with a groom.

The chief magus would then begin



to sing a Noe Rouz hymn. Before the hymn, the army commanders, and the senior members of government would enter the throne room to present the king with their well wishes. The chief magus would then, on behalf of all the well wishers, recite the following soliloquy:

" O King, our prayers are with you on this auspicious Noe Rouz. Defend freedom as your forebears. Their ethos witness today's celebration, and have brought songs of sight and savvy. Live long with the spirit of glory. Drink from the chalice of Jamshyd for wisdom. Stay green and young always as the myrtle. May you reign always straight as an arrow. May your blade stay keen against our foes. May your steed be strong and fast upon the enemy. May your treasury always be filled with gold and gems. May your pen serve the writ of justice."

The chief magus would then hand the gifts one by one to the great king while the nobles and senior knights witnessed the event.

After the advent of Islam in Iran, the first four caliphs, "senior caliphs", paid neither attention to Noe Rouz nor to Mehr'gaun. After the senior caliphs, the Ommyads (Omayyads), took over the caliphate 661-750 A.D. . they discovered that it was financially advantageous to lift the ban for these festivities. By allowing the Iranians to celebrate their feast, instead of expecting simple gifts such as myrtle, a chalice of wine, a single ring or solitary gold coin, the Ommyad caliphs demanded exorbitant gifts from the Iranians. The Iranians submitted to these demands because they desired to keep the customs of their forebears alive, and these traditions represented their independence as a nation which is continuing to this day.

Finally, between 747 and 750 A.D., an Iranian champion from the province of Khorasan by the name of Beh'zaudan, also known as Abu Moslem, overthrew the Ommyad Dynasty and selected a caliph from the house of Abbass. Thus began the Abbasside Dynasty. This Dynasty lasted from 750-1258 A.D. The capital of this Dynasty was the city of Bagdad.\* The Abbassides also allowed the Iranians to celebrate their important feasts and were active participants. We, in turn, with our utmost perseverance and fortitude continue to hold onto these traditions of our rich culture. We pass them on to future generations, no matter where they reside, as though these traditions were written with a diamond pen upon golden pages of history.

On this occasion of Noe Rouz, *Persian Heritage Magazine* extends its good wishes to all the people of the world, and especially to all Iranians.

PH

\*Bagdad is constructed from two Persian words, "Bag", God, and "dad" (daud), given, hence Bagdad means Godgiven. Before the advent of Islam Bagdad was the winter residence of the Sassanid, Kings of "Persia", Iran. Present day Iraq was always known as the first province of 27 Satrappi; Province of Persian Empire.



# Noe-Rouz

By: Mahvash Amir-Mokri

NOE-ROUZ the celebration of the new year on the vernal equinox, is an old Iranian cultural practice that has miraculously endured in its splendor and popularity despite many turmoils in Iranian history. There have been other Iranian festivities with similar significance as Noe-Rouz. Today, however, there is no celebration as important. The reason for the endurance of the celebration is that it is symbolic of a spirit of hope and renewal. One forgets old animosities and renews friendships. It is beginning of spring, and the earth is rejuvenated.

Since ancient times, Iranians have celebrated the first day of spring as the

beginning of the new year. The phrase "Noe-Rouz" literally means New-Day.

The origin of celebrating Noe-Rouz seems to have stemmed from the practices of Iranian tribes that settled in the Iranian plateau thousands of years ago. These tribes migrated from northern highlands to the warmer climate of the Iranian plateau. They were skilled horsemen and herdsmen, and seem to have developed sophisticated agricultural practices (Frye 22). Since their livelihood depended on agriculture and animal husbandry, their cultural practices very much reflect a devotion and

adaptation to nature and her forces. This devotion to nature can be seen in the identities of some of their important gods: Mithra the sun-god; Indra the god of rain, storm, and thunder; and Varuna, the god of the blue sky (Frye 21). The changes of season were considered important, as they had a direct effect on agriculture and hence their lives. Their festivals and celebrations were often held on the days marking the change in seasons.

The content of these celebrations, originally rituals pleading to the gods for better fallow and crops, was embellished by the teachings of the Prophet Zoroaster, contact with other civilizations, and the development of sciences such as astronomy and mathematics. At the same time mythologies explaining the origins of these celebrations, especially Noe-Rouz, began to develop.

Many of these mythologies find their source in the Avesta, one of Zoroastrians sacred body of texts. The Avesta reflects many of the cultural

practices of the Iranian tribes. For example, the Avesta often speaks about the importance of agriculture and deeds that bring gratitude and satisfaction to the angel of earth. There are also prayers for being granted good fortune, children, horses, flocks, land and other blessings (Pourdavood, Vol. II, 304-5). The Avesta also speaks about the creation of the sky, earth, water, plants, animals and humans. The name of the first human was Kiyumars (Pourdavood, Vol. II, 42). Although Zoroastrianism incorporated many of the extant practices of the Iranian tribes, it also revolutionized cultural practices and rituals. Iranian society went from worshipping nature to believing in a Supreme divinity, who has sovereignty over the previous gods and goddesses. This supreme power, Ahura Mazda, has human features, as it speaks to its Prophet Zoroaster, and his chosen kings such as Jamshid (Pourdavood, Vol. I, 181).

Our knowledge of how Noe-Rouz was celebrated during the Achaemenid period is very limited. What we know about Noe-Rouz today has come down to us primarily from the works of Persian philosophers, writers, and poets of the ninth through the thirteenth centuries of the common era. Most of these writers based their information on Middle Persian sources. Despite the many versions of the story about the origin of Noe-Rouz, the principle features of the story remained unchanged. They are as follows:

1-Noe-Rouz is the first day of spring

2- After Creation, when the universe was still lifeless, God ordered the holy spirits (Farvahr) to transmigrate into the body of all lifeless creations in order to give them life and motion. As a result, the sun, now imbued with life, entered the Aries constellation. Then the Light parted from the Dark. Light came to the world and gave life to animals and plants.

3-Creation was completed at this time with the emergence of the first human and the first king, Kiyumars.

4-The length of the feast of Noe-

Rouz is one week beginning on the first day of spring. The reason the celebration lasts seven days is that Ahura Mazda and the six angels nearest to him formed a body of seven called "Amshaspandan," meaning Holy Immortals. The Persian calendar was broken down by months not by weeks. Each month and each day of the month was named after a god or angel. Every first day of each month was named "Hormoz" which was also the name of Ahura Mazda. The next six days were named after the six angels nearest to Ahura Mazda.

5-The day Kiyumars became king marks the beginning of history.

6-Noe-Rouz became recognized as a tradition where divinely approved kings such as Kiyumars, Jamshid and Faridun invited people to celebrate.

### THE NOE-ROUZ CELEBRATION

The Noe-Rouz celebration consists of events which span several weeks. It includes the following activities and ceremonies, three of which are described below, in greater detail.

1-Preparations for the ceremony. Traditionally, preparations for Noe-Rouz begin almost a month before the onset of the new year. As Noe-Rouz is symbolic of renewal, it is customary to do a spring cleaning and refurbishing of the interior and exterior of one's home. Other preparations range from baking cookies and pastries to shopping for new clothing for each member of the family.

2-Just before the onset of the new year, families gather around the Haft'Sin table (see the description below). This is a very special occasion, as the whole family waits for the arrival of the new year together gathered around a table which contains symbols of the offerings and blessings of the earth. When the onset of the new year is officially announced, family members greet each other, wishing one another a healthy and prosperous new year.

3-From the day of Noe-Rouz through the 12th day of the month of Farvardin, the first month of the year, friends and relatives exchange visits, renewing old friendships. It is customary for the younger generations

to visit first and for the senior generations to return the visits after a few days.

4-One of the harbingers of Noe-Rouz is street entertainment of various forms. The bonfire of "Chahar'shanbah Suri" (see below), a ritual which takes place on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year, used to be held on the eve of Noe-Rouz. The final tradition is the annual picnic on the 13th day of Farvardin. It is called "Sizdah bi'dar".

### HAFT'SIN

One of the hallmarks of the Noe-Rouz celebration is the Haft'sin table. Noe-Rouz is the day of hope, because Iranians believed that on this day God will give each person a share of good luck (Biruni 282). Around the Haft'sin table, Iranians hope and pray for all their wishes to come true for the coming year.

There are many items on the Haft'sin table, to each of which a meaning is attached. According to Iranian myths, Noe-Rouz is the anniversary of Creation. The items on the Haft'sin table derive from different stories and myths about Noe-Rouz and Creation. These items symbolize the themes of light, abundance, happiness and health.

The myth of the first king from the Shahnamah of Firdawsi is of great help to understanding the meaning of some of the items of the Haft'sin table:

As the sun entered the Aries constellation, The world was endowed with light, water, and order.

(line 254)

Firdawsi describes Creation as involving the entrance of the Sun to the Aries constellation. The appearance of light thus becomes an important symbol. Creation was also followed by falling rains that brought life to the earth. Thereafter, kings observed the importance of the day when the Sun enters the Aries constellation and the tradition of celebrating the New Year was established. The first three items of the Haft'sin table are a mirror, a candle and a bowl of water. The mirror is the symbol of light; the candle or lamp symbolizes the sun;

and the bowl of water is the symbol of the earth. The water contains an odd number of goldfish symbolizing peaceful and harmonious relations between men and women. The odd number is meant to remind us of the presence of the Divinity.

Haft'sin literally means "seven letter S". The number seven was considered holy in Persian culture for many reasons. For example, Ahura Mazda with his six accompanying angels form a body of seven. The letter "S" is the first letter of the Persian word "Sabzah" meaning grass. The day King Jamshid defeated the cursed evil (Ahriman), plants started growing and each person grew barley in a platter as the sign of blessing (Biruni 283). This became a tradition, as people would grow seven different beans and grains for the new year celebration, hence the name Haft'sin.

A number of items on the Haft'sin table symbolize the spring season and renewal. Spring-time flowers such as hyacinths, daffodils, narcissus, and violets are placed on the table. Sprouts of wheat or lentil which have grown on a tray or plate, symbolizing the rejuvenation of vegetation are a prominent part of the arrangement. There is also a basket of painted eggs symbolizing the beginning of life.

There is a collection of white-colored edibles on the table. The color white in Persian culture is a symbol of purity, honor, and honesty. All the white flowers of Ephedra belong to Arshat, the angel which possesses the qualities of purity, honor, and honesty. Flour, yoghurt, cheese and bread symbolize abundance. White-colored sweets such as rice cookies, almond cookies, coconut cookies and marmalade, mulberry shaped almond candies, cube sugar, and sugar are placed on the Haft'sin. The cookies and pastries literally stand for the "sweetness" of life. The white-colored cookies are made from seven different grains and nuts especially for the Haft'sin.

There is a group of seven edibles on the Haft'sin table. Their names which begin with the letter "S". Some of these items are associated with a

myth, and others are necessities of life. The edible items include apples (sib), oleaster (sinjid), wheat sprout pudding (samanu), garlic (sir, which is to keep evil forces away), herbs (sabzi, symbolizing spring), soumack (sumaq, symbolizing patience and endurance), vinegar (sirkah), a candy made from almonds and honey (Sawhan-i 'asal), the sebestan (sipistan, used as a medicine). The reason for placing vinegar on the Haft'sin table is to be found in a myth. Iranians believed that grapes are the gift of the bird of good fortune. "Homa", to a mythical king of Iran in return for the bird's gratitude to the king for saving it from danger (Khayyam 76-81).

Another group of items, not edible, also symbolize some necessity of life. Coins bring prosperity to the family in the new year. Rose water is a symbol of freshness and cleanliness. Harmel (isfand) are seeds believed to be holy and their smoke is believed to repel the evil eye. (Pourdavood, Vol.I, 70).

### CHAHAR'SHANBAH SURI

In this pre Noe-Rouz celebration, people kindle bonfires and jump over them on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year. This is followed by festivities which include treats such as sweet mixed nuts, tea, candies, cookies and fruits.

The origin of the feast comes from the bonfire ceremony on the eve of Noe-Rouz meant to usher in the new year. After the Arab invasion of Iran, for some one hundred and fifty years people were not allowed to celebrate Naw-Ruz and light the bonfire. For the first time after this lag, when the population was permitted to celebrate the traditional new year, Noe-Rouz happened to fall on a Wednesday. People lit bonfires on the night before Noe-Rouz, which was eve of Wednesday, hence the name Chahar'shanbah Suri meaning the "Wednesday feast." Ever since, this particular day was set to light the fires (Abadani 4).

### SIZDAH BI'DAR

The Noe-Rouz festival concludes

with a picnic on the thirteenth day of Farvadin, the first month of spring in the Iranian calendar. The origin of this ceremony is yet to be determined. Today, it is a common belief that because the thirteenth day is ominous, people go to the outdoors in order to take bad luck out of their homes. Ancient Persian culture, however, does not seem to have considered any number unlucky. Thus the origin of this rationale for the picnic derives from other influences, probably Shi'ism, where the thirteenth day of each month has been considered one of the days of evil omen according to some authorities (Azizi 41).

According to the old Persian calendar, the 13th day of each month is dedicated to the angel of rain. The day is called Tishtar, after the angel's name. In the Avesta, a chapter, called Tishtar Yasht (meaning "praise to Tishtar"), is dedicated to this angel. In this chapter, Ahura Mazda tells Zoroaster "Tishtar, the angel to rain whom I created, is to be praised as I am, because the bounty and happiness of all Iranian lands depend on her." Possibly in ancient times Iranians spent the entire 13th day outside to pay tribute to Tishtar (Pourdavood, Vol.I, 331).

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