

Book Review:

Mahmud Farjami, *Iranian Political Satirists: Experience and Motivation in the Contemporary Era*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2017, 213 Pages. \$149.

Arthur Asa Berger*

In this fascinating book, which offers readers a glimpse into the long history of political satire in Iran, the author attempts to understand what it is that motivates political satirists. Farjami points out, early in the book, that it is an enhanced version of his PhD dissertation, with two new chapters. One is on classical Persian satire, that is, on satire up to the mid-19th century, and the second is on political satire in contemporary Iran, where satirists faced, and continue to face, the problem of dealing with a hostile political order.

His treatment of classical Persian satire discusses some of the more important early political satirists and offers some suggestions about what it was that motivated them. Among the motivations he lists were personal quarrels, attacks on hypocrisy, and attacks on authority figures. We find these satires in ironic narratives and sometimes in mystical texts. Most of the satirists Farjami names, and there are many satirists he mentions, are not people with whom westerners would be familiar.

The third chapter, on satire in contemporary Iran, has some wonderful political cartoons, whose meaning and relevance Farjami explains to us. The chapter details the problems political satirists had during the period after the Iranian Revolution in February, 1979. As Farjami writes, there was a “Spring of Freedom” right after the revolution that was short lived. He adds (2017:55) “Very soon, the free press and critical journalists were attacked and freedom of speech as a whole was such down.” Farjami then discusses some of the more important political satirists and satirical publications and details the problems contemporary Iranian political satirists and satirical publications have had and continue to have. It was the new media that enabled exiled Iranian political satirists, generally living outside of Iran, to continue to spread their messages.

This leads to two chapters devoted to theoretical approaches to humor and brief discussions of superiority theory, relief theory (what we might also call psychoanalytic approaches to humor) and incongruity theory. Humor scholars have been debating which of these theories enables us to best understand humor for many decades...maybe for thousands of years, after Aristotle offered a superiority theory of humor. Farjami also has discussions of the dominant forms of satire:

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Horatian, Juvenalian, and Menippean and points out that when he talks about satire in Iran, it doesn't "have the same meaning" as satire in Western countries. He doesn't get around to defining satire until the middle of the book, when he uses a quote from *The Encyclopedia Britannica* (2017:102) to define it:

An artistic form in which human or individual vices, folly, abuses or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, diversion, burlesque, irony, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to bring about improvement.

He follows this with some other definitions of satire, most of which focus on the critical impulses found in satire and the desire, of many satirists, to generate reform of one kind or another. He offers a chart that connects the motivations of satirists to one or all of the three dominant theories of humor.

Farjami's main focus in the book is on the motivations of satirists, as the subtitle of his book makes clear. We might ask the following question: is *Iranian Political Satirists* a book primarily about motivation which uses satire and humor to gain insights into the nature of human motivation (which means it is really a psychology book) or, is it about satire and humor and some of the psychological and motivational aspects of the creative process that generate humorous and satirical texts of one kind or another? I ask this question because dealing with motivation in humorists doesn't seem to me to be the most important topic to investigate for those interested in humor, per se. I might add that Farjami might be seen as one of many scholars who have used humor to investigate some other topic and also to attempt to quantify some aspect of humor, one way or another.

The next two chapters are the heart of Farjami's scholarly inquiry. He uses in-depth and open-ended interviews with nine Iranian satirists to collect the data he will use to try to determine what it is that primarily motivates each of his satirists. He uses directed qualitative content analysis to obtain data, based on his interviews with the satirists, and offers a unified coding frame to enable him to analyze the motivations of each of his respondents and develop a data matrix for them, showing their motivations relative to the three theories of humor discussed above. Whether Farjami provides a useful and interesting way of determining the motivations of each of the satirists

and the relations of these motivations to the three dominant theories of humor is open to question. He may have attempted to quantify the unquantifiable.

Whatever the case, Farjami has provided an engaging book that offers valuable insights into the role of political satire in Iranian culture, from its earliest years to present-day theocratic Iran, where the political situation is not conducive to political satirists and humorists of all kinds. One thing we learn from this book is that even when the political situation is hostile, there is something in the human spirit, as manifested in the work of these Iranian political satirists, which resists being suppressed. Ironically, it seems that the more political repression there is, the more artists and writers respond to it with jokes, cartoons, satires and other forms of political humor.