Chapter 13

Literary History as National History: The Sufi Tradition in Iranian Culture and Identity

Parisa Shiran
University of Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that the roots of Persian culture are in Persian poetry. The high esteem in which classical Persian poetry is held among Iranians is well known. This rich literary tradition provides enormous resources for a distinct Persian identity. However, unlike the commonly held perception that Iranian identity is a pre-Islamic construct with deep roots in the Persian cultural heritage of the Great Persia, this chapter reasserts the status of classical Persian poetry as an Islamic literary tradition, one that has had an enormous influence on Iranian society and culture. The creation of a distinct Persian Islamic identity has historically been a “cohesive force,” and this essential Islamic element must be recognized and acknowledged before any verdict about Persian identity can be reached. The chapter discusses the vast influence of Islamic mysticism on classical Persian poetry and its subsequent shaping of Iranian culture.

INTRODUCTION

National identity is a collective identity that unites the people of a nation as a coherent whole in so far as they share an historic homeland, common language, culture, and idiosyncratic traditions. But national identity is not a fixed identity category since the collective elements that act as its identifying features (language, culture, territory and traditions) are rooted in the history of the nation, and change over time. Although recent cross-cultural exchanges in the forms of globalization, and immigration have challenged the concept of national identity, people still hold on to it as their distinctive collective identity as a nation. A nation, Anthony Smith (1991) wrote, is “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal
rights and duties for all members” (p. 14). National identity, therefore, is the collective identity of the people of one country that distinguishes them from other nations through the markers of common territory, language, culture, historical memories, and common legal-political rights.

However, national identity is one among several other kinds of collective identity that people incorporate into their individual identities by living within one society rather than another. Social identity, cultural identity, religious identity, and gender identity are other important forms of collective identity that are equally constitutive of people’s perception of who they are, both as individuals and as communities. Each of these identity categories has different mechanisms of affiliation, which differ across cultures and within each culture over the course of history. Sociologists, psychologists, cultural theorists and philosophers, all have tried to explain such mechanisms of affiliation and identity formation operating within each of these identity categories in their respective fields, each stressing different factors, processes and forms of relation that constitute these identities. Yet things get more complicated when we realize that the concept of identity itself is a theoretically problematic concept. Traditionally, identity is defined as the self-image or self-concept that individuals fashion and stylize for themselves in order to gain social and political legitimacy as members of their societies. According to this understanding, identity has a relative continuity, with individuals having conscious agency over the process of identity formation (or identification). In contrast to this understanding of identity, social and cultural theorists as well as philosophers have recently begun to question the authenticity of this definition. According to such thinkers, identity is “an effect, through and within discourse” (Hall, 1996, p. 10). In other words, identity is the subject position(s) that discourses construct for us. As such, identity is always in process. Stuart Hall (1996) has explained that:

In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast with the “naturalism” of this definition, the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed – always “in process”. (p. 2)

The discursive approach that Hall refers to is the postmodern approach of thinkers, such as Michel Foucault (1926-1984), who have subjected identity to some of the most scrutinizing critiques by highlighting the illusiveness of any conception of identity as self-creation and self-assertion. Hall explains the postmodern critique in the following way:

Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not “who we are” or “where we came from”, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves .. They [identities] arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the “suturing into the story” through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as the symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within a fantasmatic field. (p. 4)