

COVERING IRAN*

by Anna Vanzan

The Italian intellectual Giorgio Manganelli provocatively affirmed that: *Every book is the support of its cover.*¹

Actually, book cover is the boundary where author's taste and publisher's marketing approach meet and often clash, because both know that the book's formal appearance deeply influences the readers' choice and disposition towards the book itself.

In the complicated relationship established between the West and the East, the world of image plays a crucial role. In these last three decades the post-modernist critique has dismantled the Orientalist construction of an East as a place invented chiefly through the help of the visual arts.

However, simultaneously, the flux of historical events leading to the re emergence of movements referred to as 'Militant Islam', 'Islamic Fundamentalism' or even 'Islamic Terrorism', has produced a plethora of publications on the Islamic world, many of which are conveyed through covers whose pictures aim to induce sensationalism and/or fear of Islam.

Iran, targeted as 'rogue country' is crucial in the process of the New Orientalism phase began after 9/11. Books and newspapers articles on Iran published in the West - no matter what subject matter they deal with - generally carry photos of bearded men and heavily veiled women as if they were threatening us with the incumbent 'clash of civilization'.

The present paper takes into consideration a number of popular and scholarly books about Iran mainly published in the U.S. and in Europe in the last 30 years and examines their covers as a powerful meaning of manipulation and manufacturing trans regional deprecation of present Iran.

The 1001 nights phase

In the 1960s Iran was still the 'Land of the Great Sophy' as it was known in Europe during the Safavid times and mainly indicated as 'Persia'. In fact, in spite of Reza Khan Pahlavi's request to call his country "Iran" (1930s) the name 'Persia' still evoked exotic reminiscences and continued to be more used than 'Iran'. The splendor of Iranian/Persian monuments was recalled by titles and pictures and the peacock throne and the lion recurred as the emblems of the country richness and power, while alluding to the hidden treasure of the oil and the shah's role as the gendarme of the Gulf. Everything was 'glittering' and fabulous in this phase that the West lived as a revival of the 1001 nights. (photos 1 and 2)

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The Shock of the Revolution

However, something changed and forever, or, at least for the following 32 years, in 1979.

In addition to many others exceptional changes, the Islamic Revolution brought a totally new image of Iran as conveyed by the media and mainly epitomized by the huge crowds of people praising -almost idolatrizing- the perennially frowning and turbaned ayatollah Khomeini, i.e., the undisputed leader of the Revolution.

From now on this will be the main picture to communicate the essence of Iran and its people to the rest of the world: an indistinct mass of people, mainly composed by bearded men in shirt and no tie, scowling at us, their mouth open while chanting slogans. Though pictures cannot talk, they are clearly shouting against us! [photos 3-4]

As an alternative, we find masses of women heavily cloaked in black veils, some of them carrying weapons. These women in particular seem to annoy us: why do they want to wear this instrument of oppression from which the shah had already liberated them decades ago?! As a matter of fact, in this stage the chador became the symbol of Iranian women, then of Iran and eventually of Muslim women's universe in harmony with the sweeping generalization we still strive to get rid of [photos 5-6].

At the same time, and in reverse, Iranians were confused with Arabs or other Islamic peoples, as any veiled woman could be passed off as Iranian: on this cover of the notorious *Not Without My Daughter*, for example, the allegedly Iranian woman wears an Arab *niqab*. [photo 7]

One could argue that this attitude was mostly due to the hostage crisis, an event which deeply strained American pride and that partially explains both the authors/publishers' choices and their readership' reaction.

However, as we will see, as time passes by, things do not get any better.

From the Dark to the New Phase

In the long period starting from the early 1980s to the late 1990s Iran was shrouded in the bloody fogs of the war against Iraq and its internal problems. Therefore, both the media and popular books' writers did not show much interest in the country. Of course, scholars and specialists of Iran continued their studies, though research in the field was very problematic, if not impossible.

The overall image of Iran remained gloomy and intimidating, confined to the religious sphere, with no different nuances: all aspects of Iranian life were represented as clad in the robes of the clerics who dominated the nation [photos 8-9].

In the late 1990s-early 2000, there was a revival of interest toward Iran as the country seemed to open towards the West while going through what is now commonly known as 'the reformist phase' led by the moderate cleric Mohammad Khatami, who at the time was President of the Islamic Republic. However, soon a sequence of international crises mainly triggered by the 9/11 catastrophe that determined an international wave of Islamophobia/antimuslimism, collocated Iran in the 'axis of evil' and cast its inhabitants in the role of 'Islamic terrorists'. This fact can in part explain why popular books scarcely witnessed to the evolution the country was experiencing, at least judging from their covers that continued to offer the same stereotyped images of the 1980s. Moreover, the titles began to insistently match Iran to words connoting conflicting and troublesome situations [photo 10].

In this phase, there was a renovated interest towards women, perhaps due to the intense activity by some female Iranians exiled in the U.S. who started to write their memories and to narrate the troubles of being a woman in the Islamic Republic. The uncontested queen of the new genre was Azar Nafisi with her international bestseller *Reading Lolita in Tehran* [photo 11]. In his passionate and demolishing review, Hamid Dabashi defined its cover '*the most immediate and intriguing aspect*' of the book, and compared this picture to the colonial postcards produced in French Algeria.² The photo wanted to create the illusion that the girls were two teenagers, continued Dabashi, i.e., two Lolitas reading Lolita: in reality, it was '*an iconic burglary from the press*' a clip lifted off the Iranian reformist newspaper *Mosharekat*. As a matter of fact, in the original picture the two girls were reading the latest reports on February 2000 parliamentary elections, thus showing their interest as mature and aware citizens.

However, if the American cover of *Reading Lolita* was a sample of '*an updated pedophilic Orientalism*', as Prof. Dabashi described it, what to say about its Italian translation? [photo 12]

Evidently, the Orientalist manipulation of the English version was not considered enough in order to convey to the Italian readership the idea of Iranian women's state of backwardness and seclusion. Therefore the image was changed to portray a woman completely concealed beneath an all covering black veil which does not even

allow us to see her face. This is how a typical Iranian woman does appear, the cover seems to suggest.

Following *Reading Lolita's* success, the never satisfied appetite for depressing accounts about mistreated Iranian/Muslim women encouraged the production of a series of autobiographies and 'true stories' corroborating the superiority of the Western style of life compared to the Eastern/Muslim one. The following image well represents this attitude, and could symbolize a warning against interfaith marriages: This is how you end when you marry an Iranian/Muslim man. [photo 13]

As we approach the mid 2000s, we note how covers change and attribute a different space to the female element, in partial recognition of Iranian women's increased presence in their society. Finally, some news creeps in the West: the astonishing progress made by Iranian girls in the field of education, their successful fighting to conquer traditionally male jobs and to win appreciation in the artistic arena provokes our curiosity.

However, the general public remain skeptical about these improvements, and book covers seem to testify to this disbelief. Women's visibility is only partial, not only because the camera still focuses on heavily cloaked ladies, but especially because the photo compositions remind us of their inferior position: they are portrayed either underneath a man, [photo 14] or behind him, [photo 15] or guided by him [photo 16]. Even when women are the solo protagonists of the scene they are never in close-up [photo 17], or, as an alternative, their faces are blurred [photo 18].

Sometimes, pictures contradict the title, as in the following case, in which the words [*Becoming Visible in Iran*, photo 19] imply that Iranian women are becoming visible in their society. However, the photo shows us only the faces of a group of them, with their bodies almost merged together in the undistinguishable black mass of their chadors. The use of color is also very telling, as black is the symbol of total passiveness, negativity and condemnation. We may argue that black is actually much used for Iranian women's attire, but anyone who has visited Iran in these last twenty years can confirm that the main towns of the plateau are filled with women dressed in colors; not to speak of the countryside, where local female costumes are multicolored and bright. That of representing Iranian women exclusively dressed in black is a precise choice which responds to the attempt to characterize them as eternal victims and to deny their agency.

Many covers not only do not show the entire women's features, but they let see only details of their faces as reflected in a rearview mirror [photos 20-21]. We are not even viewing the real woman, but only a fragment of her face in the mirror reflection, furtively captured when she is probably not aware of being in the camera focus. She does not have the right to be represented in her wholeness, and she is not aware of her being publicly exposed.

Some authors have argued that the mirror rather suggests that the cover and the content of the books are merely a reflection of reality: if this is the case, the reflection serves readership's need to

have an unbiased, objective and critical view of what's going on in contemporary Iran.³ In this perspective, the partial women's image would speak of their limited presence in the society. Nonetheless, as we know, Iranian women's incidence and status are not at all partial or ineffective. A reality that these images fail to represent. The denial of women's incontestable new role in Iran afflicts the outlook of some academic books as well, as in the case of *Sexual Policy in Iran* [photo 22].

It is to note that, generally speaking, scholarly books are not often enriched by photos, preferring simple covers just adorned by some stylized motif of Islamic art - a trend mainly dictated by budgetary considerations. As a more general investigation, it would be interesting to explore the extent to which every writer is in control of his/her book cover.

As an exception, *Sexual Policy in Iran* carries the image of the semi-profile of a woman's face hidden by a window/door frame. We may conjecture that the author did want to stress the contradiction experienced by Iranian women, whose growth and empowerment are undeniable, but who paradoxically cannot enjoy full rights. They are truly waiting on the threshold of a fulfilled citizenship, as the photo seems to suggest.

The 'Sex&Drugs&Rock'n'roll' Phase⁴

In the last years, the international media's attention has discovered the new Iranian society and its astonishing data, i.e., two third of the population is under the age of 30, one quarter being 15 years of age or under; 65% of the university students are girls; almost 70% of Iranian live in urban areas and the like. The consequent problems arising from such a young, educated, urbanized and gender sensitive society *vis à vis* an authoritative/theocratic rule are underlined by the media who often stress youth's ways of rebellion to the regime. The overall picture offered to the international opinion is that of a restless youth dedicated to endless social gatherings looking more like bacchanalians than parties, who consume alcohol and every kind of drugs and practice sex wildly.

Naturally, some book writers seized the opportunity to report on this 'Sex&Drugs&Rock'n'roll' young society.

As far as covers are concerned, we observe how they are not particularly denoting: for example [photos 23-24] could refer to many other contexts/geographical settings outside Iran. Otherwise, they propose the usual blurred female face [photo 25], images of women 'uncommitted' [photo 26], and/or whose role is marginal if compared to that played by men of the same age [photo 27].

The exaggeration in reporting on behaviors considered normal in the West such as socializing, dancing and drinking is amazing: even smoking becomes allusive of an illicit/immoral conduct, especially if performed by a woman [photo 28,] remade from another book published earlier [photo 29].

The following picture is more sophisticated and rude: the woman seems to be conscious of the photographic lens, her face is

decomposed and her lips almost obscenely offered, as they pertinently match the topic of the book (*Iran's Sexual revolution*), thus satisfying the dynamics of patriarchal voyeurism [photo 30].

I would also like to stress how even the visual renderings of children are rather manipulative, either representing them on the background of a repressive society ready to engulf their childhood into a black hole [photo 31], or already swallowed and constrained by it. This is the cover chosen by the Global Connection series *Teens* for representing Iranian teenagers: whereas all the others countries, included the Muslim ones, show cheerful, socializing kids engaged in leisure activities, the girl chosen to symbolize Iran reads the Qur'an shrouded in a scarf-cum-chador attire [photo 32].

Explosive Iran

The nuclear issue is the other topic related to Iran which has been in the foreground for quite a long time. Books on the theme are quite abundant and their covers tremendously remarkable for both images and titles.

Iran is labeled as *the world's most dangerous terrorist power* [photo 33]; *the Devil we know* [photo 34]; the country who *defies the West* [photo 35] and whose radical *messianic mission* [is] *to destroy Israel and cripple the United States* [photo 36]; the nation whose leader (i.e., Mahmud Ahmadinejad) is *the nuclear prophet* [photo 37] who is about to trigger Armageddon [photo 38].

All of it in a multitude of images of fire and blasts [photos 39-40] and of missile-shaped minarets [photos 41-42]. The climax is reached by the close-up of a dark skinned man whose eyes host, in place of pupils, two nuclear explosions [photo 43]. This last book apocalyptically devises atomic-attack scenarios on Manhattan and Tel Aviv speculating about preemptive attacks on Iran. As many others, it advises us not to waste time on negotiations, as Iran is the land of dissimulation [photo 44], an unsolvable problem well represented by a puzzling maze [photo 45], a country which remains eternal and immutable in its chaos [photo 46]: a land that is always on the verge of the brink [photo 47] and whose best depiction at the end of the 2010s is still a crowd of frocked men and *chadori* women [photos 48-49].

As a conclusion

This brief overview of book covers dealing with Iran and published in the West in the last decades shows a desolate panorama of images which confirms and reinforces the bad reputation Iran and its people have in the international community.

It may also constitute a sort of diary of how the West has approached Iran in the last three decades, as cover images reflect the global common understanding of the country. In fact, as Roland Barthes acutely observed, the photo connected to a text is *an object endowed with a structural autonomy*, nevertheless, at the same time, *it is not isolated, but in the communication with the*

text, and it has been chosen *according to aesthetic and ideological norms*. [emphasis mine]⁵

We may add that, in an epoch in which we suffer from the tyranny of the visual, images are no longer ancillary to the written text, but they rather go alongside with it. Popular books, among the others, are often chosen because of their evocative covers, titles and subtitles; therefore, publishers and graphic designers try to balance content and form to increase the selling.

Reviewing a book by starting from the cover is a new way to consider it, a sort of critical reading in reversal which allows us to deconstruct the text before reading it. As a consequence, the saying 'A picture is worth thousand words' is a double-edged weapon in the hands of both the publishers and the readership. In the case of Iran, the more the world of the press pushes towards sensationalism the more we should be alert to and critical of the books content.

Anyhow, there is another peculiar aspect related to the complex relation between Iran and its representation. As Peter Chelkowski in his seminal work has persuasively explained, the Islamic Revolution has been brought to success by *a massive orchestration of public myths and collective symbols* mainly conveyed by images.⁶ In these last 30 years, Western media have been trying to counteract the power of these images by subverting their values. Either we agree or not on many principals preached by the Islamic Republic and the way they have been followed and practiced, however we must be aware of the general, insistent and indiscriminate process of demonization of a whole country, its culture, and, above all, its innocent people, a process enforced by the distortion of images related to them.

Maybe images of intimidating Iranians can help some publishers to sell more, but this will not compensate for the overall and lasting negative consequences for Iran and the West as well.

1 In the jacket of his book *Nuovo commento*, Einaudi, Torino, 1969.

2 "Native Informers and the Making of the America Empire", in *Al-Ahram weekly*: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/print/2006/797/special.htm>

3 The motif of the mirror has been extensively theorized as dynamics of the gaze and spatial representation. See for instance Maggie Humm, "The Domestic Photograph of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell: Modernism, the Erotic and the Material", in Manuel Barbero (ed.), *Feminism, Aesthetics and Subjectivity. Women and Culture in Early 20th Century British Literature*, University of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela 2001, pp. 99-130.

One cannot abstain from mentioning that Iranians of the diaspora are also responsible for alimenting this kind of prejudice in reverse. See for example the inclement portrait of the contemporary Iranian art scene by Tirdad Zolghadr, *Soft Cover*, London 2007, whose aim was to be *an antidote to the homogenising views of Iran with which the liberal media bombard us*" (Tom McCarthy, back cover).

4 "Sex&Drugs&Rock'n'roll in the Islamic Republic of Iran" was the title of the paper presented by Pardis Mahdavi at the conference on the socio-cultural changes in post revolutionary Iran organized at SOAS in June 2009 ("30 Years on). She is also the author of *Passionate Uprising. Iran's Sexual Revolution*, Stanford University Press, 2008.

5 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message" in Paul Copley (ed.), *The Communication Theory Reader*,

Routledge, London, 1966, pp.134-147, 134-135.

6 See, among the others, his *Staging a Revolution. The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, with Hamid Dabashi, New York University Press, NY, 1999.