

The Last Muslim Intellectual: Jalal Al-e Ahmad and His Abiding Legacy

Mustafa Aslan

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

mustafa.aslan@gcsc.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

As one of the most prominent intellectuals of the pre-revolutionary era, Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) had left a lasting legacy in his homeland Iran and beyond. After his passing, Al-e Ahmad has steadily been subjected to various post-mortem inquiries, debates and oftentimes controversies. Throughout *The Last Muslim Intellectual: The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad*, Hamid Dabashi offers a critical appraisal of Al-e Ahmad's life and writings. He predicates this appraisal on both his perceptive insights and comprehensive research.

Der letzte muslimische Intellektuelle: Jalal Al-e Ahmad und sein bleibendes Vermächtnis

German Abstract:

Als einer der prominentesten Intellektuellen der vorrevolutionären Ära hat Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) in seiner Heimat Iran und darüber hinaus ein bleibendes Erbe hinterlassen. Nach seinem Tod war Al-e Ahmad stets verschiedenen Auseinandersetzungen, Debatten und oft Kontroversen ausgesetzt. In *The Last Muslim Intellectual: The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad* bietet Hamid Dabashi eine kritische Bewertung von Al-e Ahmads Leben und seinen Schriften. Er stützt diese Einschätzung sowohl auf seine scharfsinnigen Einsichten als auch auf umfassende Recherchen.

How to cite:

Aslan, Mustafa: "The Last Muslim Intellectual: Jalal Al-e Ahmad and His Abiding Legacy [Review of: Dabashi, Hamid: *The Last Muslim Intellectual: The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021.]." In: KULT_online 64 (2021).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2021.1247>



The Last Muslim Intellectual: Jalal Al-e Ahmad and His Abiding Legacy

Mustafa Aslan

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

Dabashi, Hamid. *The Last Muslim Intellectual. The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021. 334 pages, 80 GBP. ISBN: 978-1-4744-7930-1.

Born in 1923 as a Tehran native, Jalal Al-e Ahmad lived during a critical juncture of Iran's modern history. This period included many fateful events such as the Anglo-Soviet invasion in 1941, the CIA coup d'état in 1953, and the Shah's White Revolution in 1963. He died suddenly, however, in 1969 without witnessing the most dramatic change of his society brought about by the Islamic revolution of 1979. In his critical essays, novels, and short stories, he reflected on the momentous events of his lifetime while simultaneously displaying a genuine attachment to his homeland. His writings gradually built his far-reaching reputation as a remarkable writer and the restless intellectual of his time. Despite his extraordinary persona and his standing as a 'towering figure,' there still remains only a small collection of literature in English dealing with his life and writings. Within this literature, Hamid Dabashi's previous *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2017), Ali Mirsepassi's *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Mehrzad Boroujerdi's *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996) and *Persian Language, Literature and Culture: New Leaves and Fresh Looks* edited by Kamran Talattof (London and New York: Routledge, 2015) count as the few examples that have allocated a relatively large chapter to Al-e Ahmad. So far, Hamid Dabashi's *The Last Muslim Intellectual* is the only study in English devoted solely to Al-e Ahmad and thus unique by its nature.

The book artfully utilizes a substantial plethora of primary and secondary sources. Chief among these primary sources are Al-e Ahmad's own writings, both fiction and non-fiction, his letters as well as first-hand testimonies of his friends and family members. Throughout the entire book, Dabashi successfully balances his account of Al-e Ahmad's biography with the critical analysis

of his writings. Therefore, the book harbors a thorough intellectual portrait of Al-e Ahmad, successfully venturing into the complex aspects of his personality. The first chapter, “Remembrance of Things Past,” serves as an introductory chapter to the book. It asserts the book’s main argument and establishes the historical and theoretical context in which the intellectual portrait of Al-e Ahmad is situated. Both the second and third chapter, “Something of an Autobiography” and “Her Husband Jalal,” frame Al-e Ahmad’s biography in the book. They narrate his family background, education, marriage, political activities, and the inception of his writing career. Throughout these chapters, Dabashi employs the three autobiographical writings of Al-e Ahmad: *Sangi bar Guri* (A Tombstone) (1963), *Yek Chah-o-Do-Chaleh* (One Dug Well and Two Pits) (1964) and *Masalan Sharh-e Ahval* (Something of an Autobiography) (1967). Complementary to these writings, he also uses two biographical works of Al-e Ahmad written by his wife Simin Dāneshvar who was also an esteemed writer. These accounts are *Shohar-e Man Jalal* (My Husband Jalal) (1961) and *Ghorub-e Jalal* (Jalal’s Sunset) (1982). Altogether, they inform the reader of the lifetime experiences of Al-e Ahmad and how they impacted his writings from the earliest to the later stages of his career.

In the fifth chapter, “Gharbzadegi: The Condition of Coloniality,” Dabashi maps out *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication) (1962), perhaps the most seminal text of Al-e Ahmad, in terms of its historical context and wider entailments. For Dabashi, *Gharbzadegi* reveals Al-e Ahmad’s acute awareness of the global condition of coloniality and what it brought for Iran throughout the passing decades of the twentieth century. The sixth chapter, “Literary Interludes,” analyzes some of the most well-known fiction writings of Al-e Ahmad including but not limited to *Zan-e Ziadi* (The Redundant Wife) (1952), *Modir-e Madreseh* (School Principal) (1958), *Nun wa al-Qalam* (By the Pen) (1961) and *Nefrin-e Zamin* (Curse of the Earth) (1967). It displays how Al-e Ahmad’s style of prose has evolved through these fiction writings along with elucidating their social and political implications. The seventh chapter, “Travelling In and Out of a Homeland,” explores Al-e Ahmad’s numerous travelogues written in the wake of his sojourns in Iran and abroad as in his later years, he travelled to Mecca, Moscow, Jerusalem, New York and other cities in Europe. This chapter testifies to the various activities of Al-e Ahmad during these travels and his own, subjective perceptions of different countries and cities that nurtured the content of these travelogues. The eighth chapter, “Translating the World,” subjects Al-e Ahmad’s various translations from European literature to Persian and the last chapter, “From a Short Life to a

Lasting Legacy: Toward a Post-Islamist Liberation Theology,” serves a concluding summary where Dabashi reinstates the main stances of the book.

Overall, the book is very well structured with its nine chapters, complementary to each other in nature. Their contents are remarkably informative and insightful. The book’s appreciation of Al-e Ahmad can be considered both historical and literary. The review of historical and biographical facts is successfully combined with text analysis. Throughout the entirety of the book, Dabashi argues that Al-e Ahmad represented the bygone vibrant and pluralistic Muslim world that gave birth to such an intellectual before it was undermined and stifled by the resurgence of Islamism. According to Dabashi, this was attested by the immensely cosmopolitan nature of Al-e Ahmad’s intellectuality, his interaction with different literary and philosophical traditions, shrewd awareness of the world surrounding him, and critical attitude toward colonial modernity. It is precisely this perception of Al-e Ahmad that underlies the book’s nomenclature of ‘The Last Muslim Intellectual.’ On a minor critical note, however, one might find this very peculiar conviction too audacious and far-fetched. It somewhat courts the impression that no other Muslim intellectual akin to Al-e Ahmad has ever lived during or after his lifetime.