



Book : The Ayatollah Begs to Differ The Paradox of Modern Iran by Hooman Majd

Author:

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Son of an Iranian diplomat and a grandson of a prominent Ayatollah, a prolific writer, a journalist and an Iranian Diaspora living in The United States of America, Hooman Majd is called “100 percent Iranian and 100 percent American” by one of his friends in the book, ‘The Ayatollah Begs to Differ’. His diverse cultural background has not diluted the pride of the Iranian identity he holds. However, just like his complex background, Majd presents a complex outlook to the simplistic and conservative opinions held about Iran internationally. This book is a quest to debunk the popular narratives associated with Iran. The lens with which people view Iran is strewn with biases, projecting it as a fundamentalist, radical Islamist country full of sober faces of Islamic clergy wearing black turbans and women confined in chador. Majd delves deep in to the Iranian culture to unfold its complexities and uniqueness. Majd talks about how Iran became a popular name amongst his peers back in United States in the post revolution era, where as many of the people didn’t even know that Iran existed before the advent of the revolution. Majd is a strong proponent of the Islamic revolution. He views the revolution as an event that led to the emergence of Iran, his homeland, as a sovereign state, independent of the influence and intervention of the West. He frequently talks about how the popular anti American sentiment held in Iran is not only inspired by Islamic ideology or Islamic fundamentalist ideas. It is a consequence of history, a reaction to the blatant violation of the sovereign borders of Iran and constant intervention of America on the Iranian soil. He views the anti American sentiment as a manifestation of an anti colonial and anti Imperialist sentiment in the Iranian people, which dates back well beyond the era of the Pahlavi regime to thousands of years ago to the Persian Empire. Majd states that the people in Iran take pride in associating themselves to the ancient Persian empire and view any transgression or intervention on their soil as an offensive act. This view is also seen in the Arab vs Persian rivalry in the Middle East till date, where Iran views the Arab countries as its arch rival and a threat to its hegemony in the region. Majd draws the readers attention to hypocritical analysis of the way the West viewed Iran in the post revolution era. He says that the West views Iran as a country where women are forced to dress themselves in a particular attire in the public. I.e in black chador with only their faces and hands visible. He argues that women wearing black chador do not represent the whole population of women and many women observe relatively less strict hijab as they desire. However, he argues that the West forgets how, The Pahlavi regime under Reza Shah forced women to take off their hijabs and barred the Ulema from wearing the Islamic turban in the public under the umbrella of modernity. He talks about how his grandfather, who was an Ayatollah himself, stopped going out in public and his grandmother’s social life was also effected by the state’s brutal modernist program. In his book, he says that there are two parts of the Persian lives, one outside of the walls of the house and one behind those walls. What the world sees is outside the walls, whereas his mission is to tell the tales that exist behind the walls, that are the actual representative of the Iranian



culture that sprouted out the the Great Persian empire.Majd has also served as a translator for president Muhammad khatami and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and talks critically about president Ahmadinejad's obsession with Israel which tinted his image in the international arena.Majd states that instead of focusing on Israel and Holocaust , Iran has a greater issues that need her immediate attention.Social issues that exist in the society despite strict state policies require adequate response before they get out of control.Majd talks about the alarming rise of narcotics consumption in the Iranian society and how the youth has become involved in narcotic use at an alarming rate.Majd talks how not just the youth but also the clerics also indulge in use of narcotics, mentioning how he came across a cleric in the Holy city of Qom, who was smoking an opium pipe and delivering a Holy sermon. He also brings to the readers attention the prevalence of ills like prostitution and AIDS in the Iranian society similar to the West.He also says that the solution to these social problems lies in the acceptance by the state that these problems actually exist.Majd's book is an attempt to rebuke the prejudiced views held against Iran internationally and to bring forth the picture which is ignored by the world.However, much has changed since he wrote the book in 2009. His Iranian identity and his position as a translator for the two presidents puts him at a position of bias.He has tried his best to present a progressive and a relatively liberal image of the Iranian people and society that exists beyond the popular media coverage, however, he should have called out the Iranian regime for its intervention and surveillance in the Iranian life with stronger words.Moreover, this book is set in 2009, where as now in 2023, the moral police had become an actively imposing ethical and moral force.However, recently after the death of the young girl, Mahsa Amini, and the protest that followed and attracted international attention, the Moral police was called out for their violence and only after the protest and outrage the Moral police in Iran has gone on its back foot.Hooman Majd unveils the complex contours of Iranian life shaped by its vibrant socio religious culture and a rich yet a colonial past .He tries his best to explain Iran from an Iranian perspective.For someone who has access to media sources only, and aims to discover Iran beyond its authoritarian and theocratic regime, the book will be a very interesting read.

References:

Majd, H. (2009). *The Ayatollah begs to differ: The paradox of modern Iran*. Penguin.