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REVIEW: *THE EMERGENCE
OF IRANIAN NATIONALISM:
RACE AND THE POLITICS
OF DISLOCATION* BY REZA
ZIA-EBRAHIMI (2016)

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Over the last two decades, the official Iranian nationalism has been critically revisited by a number of Iranian scholars such as Mostafa Vaziri, Abbas Amanat, Farzin Vejdani and Afshin Marashi, among others. The *Emergence of Iranian Nationalism* by Zia – Ebrahimi marks another courageous and groundbreaking scholarly enterprise that problematizes the meaning of Iranianness through a meticulous examination of the ideological cornerstones of nationalist intellectuals in the Qajar period. Zia – Ebrahimi aims to interrogate the dominant Iranian historiography, whose mission has been forging a myth, which privileges the Aryan race and at the expense of an otherizing non-Aryans. What makes Ebrahimi's work a substantial intervention is its challenging of the ideological currents that have sanctified a certain construct for centuries. His work casts a shadow over both the contemporary Iranian academic and ideological productions of the statist historiographical approach to 'the national past.'

The book consists of eight sections, starting with a well-crafted introduction, and ends up with a bold conclusion. In the introduction, Zia – Ebrahimi lays out the primary concerns of his work by situating ahistorical concepts, such as Cyrus and Persianpolise, that surface persistently in everyday discussion on Iran. There he begins to dislodge the reality of an imagined past that, in his words, carves itself into almost every dimension of Iranian life, ranging from Persian rugs

to jewelry and cyberspace. The ramifications of the Aryan myth, Ebrahimi argues, have to be examined in order to reveal the ultimate ideological tendencies utilized to foster primordial Persian nationalism. By deploying a paleontological approach, Zia- Ebrahimi casts light on the primordial nationalist desires that tend to portray the imagined Iran as a nation whose existence is assumed to have been “uninterrupted” for more than 2500 years. In a sense, Persian nationalist historiography, through the erasure of historical events and changes from the ancient times to this day, is forced to consciously deny the very history that it aims to present. Through the glorification of the enigmatic pre-Islamic golden age, Persian nationalism presents Islam as a source of decadence and an Arab imposition on Iran with a sword. Inspired by the Eurocentric model of historiography that emphasizes the civility and nobility of western subject over the non-western others, the Iranian nationalists formulated a collateral ideological discourse centered on the Aryan race as a pure ancestral lineage that had flourished during the pre-Islamic period. This discourse, according to Zia- Ebrahimi, “has for too long escaped serious analysis in spite of its relevance to any rigorous assessment of modern identity or political and historical thought in Iran” (148).

The idea of “dislocation nationalism” appears to be the core claim of Zia- Ebrahimi’s book upon which a modern ideology is evoked and prevailed without

antecedent before the nineteenth century. The term “dislocative” in his account of Iranian identity is very controversial but illuminating. In what sense could nationalism be dislocative? Zia- Ebrahimi does not employ the dislocation in its conventional sense which resonates with refugee studies or geographic displacement. Rather, in a way reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined community, he uses the dislocation in its metaphorical or imaginary form: when an idea is abstracted from its empirical texture, disembedded from its historical context to bridge certain occasions or entities regardless of its constituents in reality. In the case of Iranian Nationalism, as Zia- Ebrahimi implies, the Aryan race that had appeared in pre-Islamic period is consciously tied to the modern Iran, and in so doing, the enormous impacts that Islamic periods and dynasties had on Iran are thoroughly neglected or remain undiscussed.

Zia- Ebrahimi describes how the Aryan race hypothesis was drafted to draw an identical boundary between the Indo-European and Semitic races. Having rejected those historiographical accounts that portray the Iranian embracing of Islam, the Iranian Intellectuals attempted bridge between modern and pre-Islamic periods, showing an aggressive and violent face of the Islamic time. The Iranian nationalist thinkers appealed to Aryan race theory as a common ground with European civilization to invent an intellectual

history. However, they were aware of the fact that Iran has never been recognized as a qualified member of the Aryan race. Hence, the politics of dislocation were implemented to overcome the intellectual and mental trauma Iran had in its encounter with European countries. On the other hand, these scholars believed that the Iranian ethos of civilization had become historically contaminated with Semitic culture and should be purified by turning to the magnificent past of Iran. Therefore, the dislocative nationalism could offer an antidote in either finding a shared ground with the advanced western nations or differentiating Aryan culture from the Semitic culture perceived as uncivilized and backward.

While some believe that modern Iran emerged under Pahlavi dynasty and its modernization policies, which eventually led to the modern political system with the evocation of the pre-Islamic notion of identity, Zia-Ebrahimi traces the emergence of dislocative nationalism back to Qajar period between the 1860s to 1890s. The Pahlavi State integrated this ideology into its official discourse of identity and made use of it to assimilate the multi-ethnic Iranian culture. This doctrine became the pivotal discourse of secular opposition in Iran against the Islamic Republic, which is centered on the Islamic interpretation of the Iranian culture and politics.

Using a textual approach, Zia- Ebrahimi argues that the footprints of dislocative nationalism were for the first time left in the texts of Akhundzadeh and Kermani, two intellectual thinkers in Qajar period. Their thoughts and writings lucidly reflected the socio-political turbulence of Iran stemming from the Iranian colonial encounter with the Russia and British imperialism. They, like many people of their generation, were desperately trying to understand how European modernity emerged and expanded, and how to emulate their pattern towards the modernity. Thus, Zia- Ebrahimi grants Akhoundzadeh and Kermani as the founding father of Iranian nationalism, whose personal encounters with imperial Europe on the one hand and downgrading the Islamic societies as backward and uncivilized on the other hand, urged them to devote a great deal of their life to formulate the discursive underpinning of Iranian nationalism. However, Zia- Ebrahimi is well aware that Akhundzadeh and Kermani's primary accounts were to offer an imaginary narrative rather than an objective factual understanding of pre-Islamic Iranian history. By delving into the life and time of Akhundzadeh and Kermani, Zia- Ebrahimi gives an incredible account of the emergence and justification of the dislocative nationalism during the Qajar period and how the historiographical sketches are developed or manipulated in favor of the Iranian nationalism. At this point, racism became an essential part of Iranian nationalism in its effort to build a myth-

ical identity regardless the negation of empirical facts. These thinkers, haunted by the Eurocentric model of thought, even went further than their European counterparts and made a subtle division between Iranian identity and its Islamic heritage; However, the racial theory never overcame the lack of the historical facts and the historical complexity of the rise and expansion of Islam in Iran.

Zia- Ebrahimi challenges the Orientalist idea that Iran was violently forced to adopt Islam and that Muslims destroyed the pre-Islamic texts and literature. Instead, he argues that “aversion to miscegenation” constitutes the heart of Iranian dislocative nationalism, whose urge for differentiation and demarcation comes at the price of a denial of Islamic legacy from its very beginning to the present time. Even the rise of enormous territorial empires such as Safavid empire in Islamic Iran was not sufficient to quench their thirst for an old golden age as racial purity for them preceded the size of territory. For these thinkers, the ancient Iran was the root of all possibilities, a period that had been invaded, destroyed and replaced by the Arabs; now, their task was to exonerate the pre-Islamic legacy through revisiting the past. However, in spite the dearth of evidence to investigate the remote past in this vein, the dislocative nationalism was praised at least as a tentative endeavor by Orientalists.

The nationalistic project offered by Akhundzadeh and Kermani revolved around three ideological ingredients: pre-Islamic archaism, anti-Arabism, and hybridized-despotic approach to Europeanization (147). Zia- Ebrahimi argues, however, that the Akhundzadeh and Kermani dislocative nationalist account is historiographically unfounded and suffers from several failures: It is excessively romantic, characterized by a historical desire for the exaltation of an ambiguous past. It also has authoritarian tendencies that contain elements of elimination and denial of diversity and the rights of other cultures. Finally, as a failed imitation of European Enlightenment, it grapples with the lack of reliable historiographical evidence. Critically dismantling the rise and prevail of nationalism in Iran, Zia- Ebrahimi reveals the calamitous nature of Iranian dislocative nationalism and its impacts on Iran as a multi-cultural country. Therefore, he advocates the multiplicity of nationalist ideologies that celebrates the cultural diversity within a political system, one which he termed civic nationalism rooted in law and legislation. Ultimately, Zia- Ebrahimi's book makes a tremendous contribution to the field of Iranian Studies, Political Sociology, Historiography, and Postcolonial Studies by shedding light on how a historical discourse can emerge and develop, and what socio-political impact might it have on a multi-ethnic society.

