
Myth About Myths

Shiva Rahbaran interviews Amir Hassan Cheheltan November 2011

The Iranian writer on the tension between artists and intellectuals, the power of mysticism, and the long-lasting effects of the 1979 revolution.

Amir Hassan Cheheltan does not, on the whole, have an optimistic view of social developments in Iran over the past century and describes modern Iranian thought and literature as “congenitally deformed.” He does, however, acknowledge the importance of the Islamic Revolution as “a full-length mirror that showed us to ourselves.” But the cost of this self-knowledge was the loss of almost all the capabilities of the Iranian nation.

All the same, he considers the “mirror” of the revolution to have been beneficial for the growth of contemporary Iranian literature—especially the novel. Over the past two decades, Cheheltan has witnessed unprecedented enthusiasm for novels in parallel with a notable decline in the reading of poetry. He interprets this phenomenon as a shift in society from emotion and mysticism to rationality and levelheadedness. He welcomes this development and believes contemporary literature can don Iran’s revolution-stricken society in the garb of a new, global identity, and rid it of old sediments and superstitions.

Although there is always a distance between the public and writers in their capacity as observers, Cheheltan does not feel alienated in his traditionalist society which is beset by censorship. As far as he is concerned, even Hedāyat, who can easily be said to have been the epitome of an alienated artist in a traditionalist and backward society, would not have been able to produce valuable works without some “commerce” between himself and his society. Cheheltan’s novels are fueled by the contrast between Iran’s urban society—especially in Tehran—and Iran’s legend-based history. In his novels, he tries to depict this “modern, legend-based” history in everyday life.

Cheheltan has survived two attempts on his life. In 1999, he fled Iran amid a surge of violence against the nation’s intellectuals. He returned to Tehran two years later and has since continued publishing his work. His most recent book, *Tehran, Revolution Street*, was published in 2009. *Killing American in Tehran*, a detailed portrait of the mega-city Tehran as the focal point of the conflicts between the CIA, the British Secret Service, the Mullahs and the Shah’s reign of terror, was published this August.

Shiva Rahbaran: What impression do Iranians have of democracy? Many people are of the view that democracy is, basically, of no use to Iranians in view of their rites, traditions, and history, and that it will never succeed here.

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: Let me begin by telling you about the things that distinguish Iran from all other comparable societies; i.e. all the other Islamic or even Asian countries. This may, to some extent, make us conscious of the particular complexities of this society and its approach to modernity and democracy. Iran was the first country outside the American and European region to acquire a parliament, in 1906. The movement for the rule of law and election-based democracy bore fruit in Iran even earlier than in Russia, where its social movement suffered a setback in 1905. So you can see how many years ago the need for democracy was first felt in Iran. But the question is: why isn’t it possible to achieve

democracy in Iran? Why is it that, despite feeling the need for the rule of law and the opposition to arbitrary power, our people do not make shrewd efforts to achieve democracy?

Incidentally, I should add that I'm of the view that human societies only have the potential for gradual change; revolution is an impossibility.

Our important problem is our strategic position over the past century as an oil terminal. Added to which was the problem of having the Soviet Union as a neighbor. Of course, this difficult position has helped Iran at some historical junctures. In the modern era, Iran never became a colonized country, in the way that India was, for example. In other words, it was never ruled by foreign powers, although there were times when it had very little control over its own affairs. So I can't totally discount the role of foreign forces in impeding the attainment of democracy. Without a doubt, the eight-year war with Iraq was one of the events that halted the growth of democracy in Iran.

Artists are not necessarily intellectuals. Intellectuals produce ideas. Artists produce beauty.

Shiva Rahbaran: But do you think that intellectuals have also been to blame? Iranian intellectuals—starting from the Constitutional Revolution, which you mentioned, to the time of Mossadegh, to the 1979 revolution—have tried to arrive at modernity and democracy via a paradox; i.e. synthesizing religion and the state. Don't you think that this paradox or anomaly is to blame for the failure of democracy in Iran?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: I don't agree with your assessment. Yes, democracy has suffered a reverse in Iran. If intellectuals showed fellowship with what happened in 1979, it was because they had no choice. The events that unfolded around that time displayed more clearly than before the strong presence of religion in the inner layers of Iranians' minds. Religion doesn't only manifest itself at religious events in Iran; religion is a spirit that also reveals itself in people's conduct and in legal and social forms. The people reacted against the modernity that Reza Shah wanted to establish in Iran. The criticisms and analyses that are made of his rule have persuaded me that, if he had enjoyed a minimum of popularity among the people, he would have been able to display some resistance to the pressure that the Allied forces put on him to leave the country. My father told me that, when Reza Shah left, the people started killing neighborhood policemen because they didn't represent security; they were the instruments of domination and coercion.

I think that the level of success of any new program in a society directly depends on the people's capacity to absorb and accept it. The solutions that intellectuals or politicians devise will not lead anywhere unless this important factor is taken into account.

Shiva Rahbaran: So where has the mission of intellectuals and artists got to in Iran today?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: You have to bear in mind a couple of points. Artists are not necessarily intellectuals. Intellectuals produce ideas. Artists produce beauty. The ideas that are produced in our age rapidly become politicized and they may be of use for only a passing moment. But the artist has a broad horizon; the world is his audience.

Moreover, over the past fifty years, our intellectuals have always been anxious to perform the mission of rescuing the people; this anxiety has made them hasty and sometimes they've been drawn toward extremes. At one point, they were drawn into the Tudeh Party. Then, they were drawn to the idea of

guerrilla warfare. And, then, there was the “return to self” movement, of which Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad was one of the standard-bearers. I have no idea who “the self” is in the twentieth century and where he is to be found. *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication) is a masterpiece of illiteracy. Just taking a short course in sociology would suffice for anyone to see what demagogic nonsense this book is. What’s interesting is that some of our intellectuals are absolutely devoted to Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad. We suffer from a poverty of thought. No one produces thought. And the bigger tragedy is that Iranian artists and writers imagine that they are committed, so that they can fill this void. Yes, of course, Nazim Hikmet, Pablo Neruda, Yiannis Ritsos, and others have produced political poetry, but their love poems far outnumber their political poems. We’ve always missed the depths of developments and have, consequently, remained dwarves. This is why what we know as political literature in Iran doesn’t have one iota of aesthetic value. A political declaration intended to generate excitement; that’s all. Iran’s artistic community has suffered so many casualties because of this misunderstanding.

These casualties have suddenly and tragically hurled the contemporary Persian language—which has been deprived of good poetry and good short stories—into the world, where it can see that it lacks many things, including revolutionary poets, revolutionary writers, and revolutionary parties.

Sometimes I think the fact that Iran was the only country—among all the countries that were conquered by the Arabs—that was able to preserve its language is more like a miracle.

Shiva Rahbaran: The impression I got from what you were saying is that, if anything, it has too many of this kind of poets and writers.

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: Of course. But why? Because it immediately wants to compensate for what it lacks. This haste removes things from their natural reality and everything becomes mere fantasy. We suffer from a kind of congenital deformity and dwarfism in all things and in all spheres. It’s the same with democracy. It wants to be born somewhere where it’s impossible for it to grow. The infant’s delivery has proved unsuccessful so far.

Shiva Rahbaran: Do you think we can say that the revolution in Iran was a historical necessity?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: I think so. Moreover, this revolution displayed this society’s essence to Iranian intellectuals for the first time. This society was like a small pool with a thin layer of translucent water on the surface which made us unaware of the depths of the old sediments; because we’re such emotional, perfunctory, and hasty people. This revolution was like a full-length mirror that showed us to ourselves. But did we have to pay such a high price for this achievement? Now, that is to say, in these few years since Khordad, everyone is asking themselves how to go through this transitional period [to democracy] at the lowest possible cost. The belief has finally come about that we must re-examine our historical past in order to extricate ourselves from the impasse. The Iranian nation lost almost all its capabilities in order to arrive at this awareness. In fact, one of the amazing things about this nation, historically, is that it has always gone to the very edge of an incontrovertible abyss, but has somehow been able to find the strength to rebuild something again.

Maybe this is our last refuge. When the mind’s powers can’t uncover the hidden logic behind events, we inescapably seek refuge in fairy tales and legends. Sometimes I think the fact that Iran was the only country—among all the countries that were conquered by the Arabs—that was able to preserve its language is more like a miracle. In fact, the Persian language is itself a miracle. Among the European

countries, Italian—I mean the language that people speak in Italy today—is possibly older than the rest. The oldest books available in this language are Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which were written less than seven centuries ago. It would seem that there are no older books than these two in the languages that are currently spoken in Europe. But Ferdowsi's *Shāhnāme* was written eleven centuries ago and even schoolchildren can understand it today.

I view the treasure chest of classical Iranian literature from a historical perspective and I see it as a philosophical, moral, and literary aggregate.

Shiva Rahbaran: Mr. Dariush Shāyegān has suggested that, because mysticism and illuminationism have formed an important part of the Iranian heritage, the novel has never flourished here, because the novel is the offspring of European reason from the Renaissance onward.

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: I agree with him. As it happens, over the past two decades people have started showing some enthusiasm for novels and novel writing has grown in Iran. It would appear that our society is gradually turning toward reason and thought. In fact, while Iranian literature revolved around poetry in the past, short stories and especially novels have taken pride of place over the past two or three decades. Poetry is generally considered to be the realm of the imagination and emotion—something that is, of course, still very much needed by human beings today—but novels are the realm of thought. Among all the literary occupations, none is as linked to contemporary life as novel writing. It was necessary for us to push superstition and emotionalism slightly to one side at last.

Shiva Rahbaran: Is Iranian mysticism or Iranian poetry part of your heritage? Or is it only important to you as something that you have to go beyond?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: Well, I go for useful things. For example, I'd only put old objects on a shelf in my room if they formed a pleasing ensemble with the present-day objects; otherwise, I'd send them off to the storeroom. We don't have to accept unconditionally everything that relates to our past or, even worse, be fanatical about them. I view the treasure chest of classical Iranian literature from a historical perspective and I see it as a philosophical, moral, and literary aggregate. Moreover, I look for the aesthetic aspects of this literature; I don't accept the definition of being that it contains. Our current problems are not related to the conditions that produced this literature. Its meaning-component is only of historical value as far as I'm concerned. The attraction of this literature for me is discovering the Persian language. Because, every time I turn to it, it shimmers with changing colors, reveals its hidden potential, and sets the strings of my soul vibrating endlessly.

As for the things that Dariush Shāyegān says, they are very good in as much as he is someone who has the courage to explain ideas, which aren't even that abstract and which directly concern the world of us Iranians. He's the only one who tries to give an account of our situation in a rational way. We're an oral nation. When we see each other, we can talk for hours about any subject, but we never set down even a couple of sentences of it on paper. But sometimes I think that he's trying to rationalize and excuse our situation.

Shiva Rahbaran: He talks about the failure of modernism and, in my view, looks onward to postmodernity. In other words, Shāyegān talks about postmodernity "turning away from reason and moving toward mysticism and illuminationism.

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: Yes, that's right. For example, he believes that the growth of technology, prosperity, and progress in Japan is tenuous and fragile. Perhaps he's right. But I can't turn a blind eye to Japanese people's happiness. I envy them. What is happiness after all? Happiness is the fact that, when a Japanese writer leaves his house, he's sure that he won't be stabbed by someone who is lying in wait to kill him. When the Japanese fall ill, they don't have to worry about how they're going to pay for the doctor and the medicines. Yes, this is happiness. Of course, these same Japanese people may become depressed or they may feel sad at night, before they fall asleep, about the fact that they've become disconnected from their ancestral roots.

I can't see Japan as an example of failure. And I wouldn't make the following recommendation to any nation: If you come from an Eastern, mysterious, and mystical background, you better appreciate your ancestral heritage.

Shiva Rahbaran: But hasn't Iran always risen from the ashes thanks to its legacy of myths? Hasn't Iran always been the land of miracles?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: If we believe this, we'll never do anything. We can't just sit and wait for miracles. In order to come out of this impasse, I need tools that will help me find solutions.

Shiva Rahbaran: So do you see novel writing, which goes hand in hand with realism, as a difficult thing to do in this miracle-prone nation?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: Of course. Look, our contemporary poetry has thousand-year-old parents. But our contemporary novels have a lineage of only sixty or seventy years. I can't view the samples of classical Persian writing as the predecessors of modern novel writing. So Persian isn't very proficient in the realm of novel writing. Persian and poetry have been wrestling together for a thousand years, but the Persian novel is a newborn infant.

Shiva Rahbaran: So don't you see yourself as an artistic outcast in this land? I mean, isn't your art, i.e. novel writing, sidelined by poetry?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: No. But I suffer from a dearth of readers in general, of course.

Even if I think that the airplane was invented for dropping bombs, I still can't hide my joy and satisfaction about the fact that it can take me from Tehran to London in just four or five hours.

Shiva Rahbaran: You mean the writer and the poet are outcasts here, in their homeland?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: Maybe. Iranian writers write in a vacuum. A print run of a few thousand is very small.

Shiva Rahbaran: What role do literary studies play in improving this situation? Many people abroad, in the departments of literature in Western universities, are of the view that literary studies can, at the same, be a kind of display of power by the West *vis-à-vis* the East, and a new method of colonizing the Eastern spirit and soul.

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: Paying attention to these things and striving to unravel them has turned into a way of life for the Western human being. Even if I think that the airplane was invented for dropping bombs, I still can't hide my joy and satisfaction about the fact that it can take me from Tehran to London in just four or five hours.

We haven't made any effort to unravel ourselves. Western curiosity about everything, including things that relate to me, is not a conspiracy in my view. But I confess that I find it unpleasant if people look at me, at my life, at my history, and at my past as they would look at things in a laboratory. Knowledge must be gained in proportion to understanding. Maybe one day a more equitable relationship will be established at last and we, in turn, will be able to unravel unknown aspects of the Western human being.

Shiva Rahbaran: But since there is an imbalance of power, there's little chance that Iranian research will catch up with Western research.

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: Perhaps. But this conundrum is a product of our own stupidities. Sādegh Hedāyat's works are banned now. Even Saadi is censored; they're not authorizing the publication of Saadi's *Ghazaliyat*. There's no mention of contemporary Iranian literature in schoolbooks. Schoolchildren and university students aren't taught to be interested in contemporary literature. I don't accept the idea that research work by Westerners is an imperialist conspiracy. It may be that intelligence organizations use the information too. I'm not in a position to say. But I find it appealing that some people are interested in finding out, for example, who I am, what I write, and why I write. This is pleasing to me.

Shiva Rahbaran: It's not good for art to become politicized. But this has always happened in Iran; for social reasons and because of the reverses that we've suffered in our experiences of modernity. The phenomenon of modernity has taken strange forms in Iran and it has always been combined with suppression and repression. But, in the West, many people envy this situation. They believe that the severe anomalies and divides that have emerged in contemporary Iran have produced good grounds for Persian literature. Moreover, the creators of literary works enjoy a level of respect here that is rare in contemporary Western societies. Although the print run of books is low and books don't sell as well as they do in the West, you and your colleagues can, as writers and poets, fill a sports stadium with enthusiasts. So they've come to the conclusion, in the West, that freedom is, all in all, bad for producing good poetry and novels. Basing themselves on what Henry James said about novels—i.e. that every novel is a window in the house of fiction—they say that since you, Iranians (or third-worlders), have more walls, you can put in more windows, so your work is more important and more meaningful.

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: I don't know. But if I was the owner of the literature that's now being produced in Iran, I would be prepared to give it up and to have a free and happy society instead.

The enthusiasm for writers here is because we're a legend-minded nation. Iranians think that words have magical powers. Writers produce words. Nowadays, when soccer players or TV actors are the new legends, the presence of a writer somewhere produces a sudden hush and an atmosphere of sanctity. There's another reason too: in Iran over the past hundred years, where the dominant aspect has been suppression and repression, there's been a porthole that they've never been able to close. The name of this porthole is literature. In the most difficult political times and at the height of censorship, Iranian poets and writers have never stopped working. In such circumstances, the simplest words—against the backdrop of

the existing conditions—take on a figurative aspect and fulfill people's needs. This turns writers into charismatic figures.

[N]ot saying exactly what you mean is ingrained in Iranians because of some historical experiences.

Shiva Rahbaran: So is the absence of freedom good for literature?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: It depends on whether the writer is clever enough to turn the restrictions into a springboard. We've been able to turn the restrictions into a literary form. For example, in a modern short story, I may just speak to you about a corner of a table and, then, the arm of a chair, and, on this basis, you're supposed to picture the rest of the room in your mind. I mean, limitations on what you can say has an aesthetic aspect too. The censors always want us to write a story in which we don't say anything. This helps me raise the aesthetic level of my work; if I approach things consciously of course.

Shiva Rahbaran: Hasn't this censorship turned into self-censorship in our midst? Hasn't it created a situation in which we avoid saying many of the things that we want to say?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: In Iranian-Islamic culture, this is what is known as *taqiyeh*. It means that you should be silent for now, you should not protest, you shouldn't say anything so that you can live to speak some other day, when the situation has improved. Moreover, not saying exactly what you mean is ingrained in Iranians because of some historical experiences. It is difficult to know who to trust; not your neighbor; not your colleague; not your fellow student; not even your spouse. We talk a lot, of course, but only in order to hide a substantial part of the facts, and this has turned into a social characteristic.

Shiva Rahbaran: You've turned into a very strong realist. In this respect, your *Rowzeh-ye Qāssem* (Qassem's Story), for example, seems "more modern" than the more epic-like and poetical *Kelidar*. Do you see yourself as a writer who is more "contemporary"?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: I can't answer that. Our writings are different. Moreover, *Rowzeh-ye Qāssem* is the first novel that I wrote of course I wasn't allowed to publish it for a full eighteen years. I'd like to be judged by my subsequent novels. For example, by *Tehrān, Shahr-e Bi-Asmān* (Tehran, City without a Sky). This short novel, with a very succinct language, is the social history of our past five, six decades.

I can't sit at my computer, tremble in fear at the undoubted supremacy of the lunatics that rule in this or that corner of the world, and feel fellowship with antiquated literature.

Shiva Rahbaran: Many Iranian novelists, such as Dowlatabadi and Mandanipour, say that an important part of their heritage and their bedrock consists of the classics, such as *Samak Ayyār*, *Kelileh va Demneh*, and *The Thousand and One Nights*. Are you an iconoclast to the extent that you turn your back on your Iranian heritage and only view Western novels as your bedrock?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: Iranian storytelling is part of my heritage. But I'm also a citizen of the world. It goes without saying that part of the past hangs in the air that I breathe today. But I don't surrender to it. I may have more in common with Kafka, Joyce, and Proust than the works that you named. I can't sit at my computer, tremble in fear at the undoubted supremacy of the lunatics that rule in this or that corner of the world, and feel fellowship with antiquated literature. I have reached a peaceable agreement with the past, which belonged to my ancestors; a restful nostalgia that is a source of spiritual calm for me.

Shiva Rahbaran: Iranian society is more modern now than at the time when Hedāyat was writing. He was totally alone. Do you suffer from less isolation?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: The society in which I live and I are constantly engaged in commerce with each other. Without this society, Hedāyat and I couldn't have existed. But there's always a distance. There's always a distance between the individual and society. But how does it happen that this distance sometimes becomes calamitous?

Three, four generations ago, it became possible for some Iranians to become acquainted with other ways of life. But it wasn't possible for all Iranians. Our society's current crisis in fact results from this: a wrangle between the supporters of two different ways of life. Hedāyat was in an absolute minority.

Shiva Rahbaran: It was interesting to me, in *Rowzeh-ye Qāssem*, to see how you exploit our superstitions and turn them into everyday life. That is to say, you create a realist structure out of the delusions in our minds; as if they have an external, real existence. But now, if I understand you correctly, you're saying that you don't want these sentiments to exist in Iran, although you use their aesthetic aspects.

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: I look at myths with a surrealist eye. At the same time, in *Rowzeh-ye Qāssem*, I make a point of recreating these myths in everyday life. Myths are a part of our everyday lives. I take advantage of these elements to lend color to the fictional atmosphere, in an aesthetic sense.

Shiva Rahbaran: Aren't you creating new myths in this way?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: Maybe people who wear suits and use computers have taken on the role of those myths now. We change, but much more slowly than we imagine.

Shiva Rahbaran: Do we need myths as mirrors in which we can look at ourselves?

Amir Hassan Cheheltan: No! They're a nuisance. They rob us of the capacity for pure thought. We must consciously distance ourselves from them.