

Reading Iranianness through the life of Naqsh-e Jahan Square

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Built in the 16th century and regarded as one of Iran's most important historical and tourist sites of Iran, Naqsh-e Jahan Square is surrounded by mosques, palaces and bazaars containing hundreds of handicraft stores, artisanal workshops, art galleries and a fine art faculty. Each day, thousands of merchants, artists, artisans, dealers, and tourists gather in the square's bazaars to visit and trade commodities which is referred to as 'Iranian art'. This project interrogates how the multiple social actors, networks and material culture residing within and transiting through Naqsh-e Jahan's bazaars bring into being contemporary and multiple conceptions and articulations of 'Iranianness'. More particularly, the project examines the ways in which so-called 'Iranian art' are brought to life through generative labor, discursive acts, and material forms. I aim to see the square as a spectacle in which story of things and people intersect through time and spaces and mediate various conceptions of Iranian identities, including provincial sense of belonging to the nation.

Relaying to Bakhtin (2010) who see the chronotope as the analysis unite and a conduit through which meanings and worldviews meet each other, I aim to understand various configuration of Iranianness in Naqsh-e-Jahan square beyond official spatiotemporal definition of Iran as a modern nation-state.

Through this project, I aim to explore how such identities are articulated in the context of a hegemonic modern, post-Revolutionary Iranian nation-building project whose culture, arguably, places emphasis on Twelver Shi'a Islam, the Persian language and an antipathy toward the West that has resulted in a type of bounded nationalism. How and to what extent do conformist or alternative formulations of Iranianness and counter-narratives emerge in such a context?

While I rely on stories of things and people who are directly or indirectly involved in the social life of the square, I will write the square '*sar'gozasht*' in relation but independent from its actors. *Sar'gozasht* is one of the many words in Persian which refers to biography and can be translated to 'what is witnessed' and applied for both human and nonhuman subjects. While this notion stands for the narrative of someone/somewhere/something life, the embedded idea of witnessing gives rise to thinking about distributed agency between the human-nonhuman subjects and the network around them. It has the potentiality to include both cultural history and what is excluded from the wholistic conception of culture and can be only found in constant working against culture (Abu-Lughod 1998).

Biography: I am a Ph.D. candidate in social anthropology at York University in Toronto. My research interests focus on the intersection of materiality, affect, and belonging. I am interrogating how art and material culture are incorporated in processes of subject making in contemporary Iran, in particular Isfahan. I apply a post-colonial feminist approach in my research to examine how the conception of 'national art' is lived out in the historical site of Naqsh-e Jahan Square. Over the last ten years, I have collaborated with different NGOs in Iran as a freelance researcher to write and record the oral history of volunteers and social entrepreneurs.