

Unveiling Power: A Study of Political Discourse in Iranian Illustrated Lithographic Shāhnāma of Firdawsī (1847-1897) from Tavakoli Archive

The lithographic books of Iran have undergone extensive examination from technical, content, and aesthetic perspectives. However, these artistic works harbor concealed social, political, and cultural dimensions intimately tied to the structural shifts within Iranian society. Surprisingly, minimal research has delved into these profound layers. I aim to unravel the discourse of power embedded in the creation of illustrated lithographic books, focusing specifically on a case study of Shāhnāma of Firdawsī produced between 1847 and 1897 from Tavakoli Archive through the research I will undertake during my M.A program of Near and Middle Eastern Studies. In contrast to their predecessors, the illustrated manuscripts predominantly crafted within the court apparatus, these lithographic books emerged within Iran’s commercial framework—the bazaars.

Throughout this analysis, I employ two theoretical frameworks. The first is Michel Foucault's concept of knowledge-power. The second theory under consideration is the “Īrānshahrī spirit”, introduced by Sayyed Javad Tabatabai. This concept serves as a framework for understanding political thought and governance in ancient Iran, encapsulating the collective perspectives of Iranians throughout history, particularly on fundamental political concepts such as sovereignty.¹ The primary objective of this project is to scrutinize the political discourse embedded in the reproduction of the lithographic Shāhnāma during the specified years, utilizing the two proposed theories. It is hypothesized that a distinct political discourse underlies the recurrent production of this book and similar literary works like *Gulistān Sa’dī* and *Khamsa Nizāmī*. Furthermore, the technical attributes unique to lithographic books distinguish them from manuscripts and photography, shaping the political discourse of their production and its consequences, thereby granting them distinctive features. This investigation involves the examination of illustrations in

¹ M Boroujerdi and A Shomali, “The Unfolding of Unreason: Javad Tabatabai’s Idea of Political Decline in Iran”, *Iranian Studies*, 48 (6), 2015, pp 951-952.

these books, considering thought and idea, form, and technique as direct elements expressing power, alongside an analysis of the textual content.

My academic foundation includes a bachelor's and master's degree in museum studies. I have developed a profound understanding of lithographic books with over 13 years of hands-on experience in Iranian museums such as the Malek National Library and Museum and Reza Abbasi Museum. I also have the privilege to cooperate with Tavakoli Archive since May 2024 which provides a great opportunity to work with the archival materials. As a native Farsi speaker with a grasp of Arabic and Turkish, I have a broader range of sources for comprehensive research.