

Professor Amir Hassanpour (1943-2017): A Writer, Educator, and Advisor

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The late Professor Amir Hassanpour was a faculty member at the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, University of Toronto, from 1999 to 2009. He enjoyed a previous professorial career of teaching and research at the University of Windsor (1987-1993), and at Concordia University (1994-1996). Professor Hassanpour was a prolific writer, a resourceful reference, and an insightful instructor: impressive qualities that are best seen in his lists of publications and intellectual undertakings.

His two major books, *Nationalism and Language in Kurdistan, 1918-1985* (1992),¹ based on his dissertation at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1998), and *The Oral Written Traditions of Kurdistan* (2004),² are the first ever written by a Kurd on the Kurdish language in its status as a national identity; on the history of the language; and on its various dialects. The Kurdish language is subjected to arbitrary political divisions and is sometimes even suppressed; the denial of this intrinsic right of a nation is dubbed “linguicide” by the author,³ a term no less ominous than its kin “genocide”. The themes discussed in these books recur in more than ten extensive articles and essays over ten years, keeping a near complete multilingual bibliography on the Kurdish language, some written even in Syriac, the literary language of Middle Eastern Christianity. His bibliography proved to be invaluable for research on a Kurdish grammar written in Syriac in 1888 by a monk stationed in the region of ‘Amadiyya in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁴ The bibliography showed that during the 19th century, grammatical studies on Kurdish was not restricted to Orientalists alone—the grammar of Garzoni⁵ comes to mind here—but also to the immediate neighbours of the Kurds in Iraq, the Assyrians and the Chaldeans. In addition to his help in explaining certain Kurdish terms and idioms found in this Syriac grammar of Kurdish, Professor Hassanpour saw in the manuscript a societal harmony in that region of Kurdistan, inspiring the monk to unravel the phonology, morphology, and syntax of Kurdish for his own people in their own tongue.⁶ With regard to the Kurdish language spoken dialectally by Kurds scattered in four different lands (Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey), he argued for a bi-standard language involving the two main dialects of Kurdish, Kurmanji and Sorani.⁷

Professor Hassanpour did not limit himself to subjects on Kurds and Kurdish, but also covered a wide range of topics discussed in academic papers and conferences, tackled in international mass media, and covered in the curriculum of his teaching career. Thus, genocide, terrorism, and ethnic and gender violence, including honour killing, are major themes in his publications. Regarding genocide, he decried Iran’s Holocaust denial, but at the same time lamented anti-Palestinian prejudice and violence on the part of Israel, which “uses the Holocaust to justify its policy of uprooting the Palestinian people;”⁸ however, anti-Palestinian prejudice is not shared by all Israelis. His articles also deal with the Turkish government’s ongoing denial for the Armenian Genocide.⁹ For our author, genocide was a crime directed not only against its victims, but a crime against all humanity, which must be recognized and prosecuted.

Honour killing, the deadly violence directed against Muslim women who behave outside the norms of Muslim society, is another major concern in his writings. He attributed violence against women as not necessarily to a specific religion or nation, but to what he called “the supremacy of the male gender.” He maintained that a “host of factors, ranging from religion, public policy, and media to academic theories, play a role in its perpetuation” in the Islamic world and in the West.¹⁰

Sensitive to the plight of women living in a male-dominated society, Professor Hassanpour glued stickers bearing the fourteen names of the female victims of the École Polytechnique massacre on the door of his office, which remained as a memorial for several years. Genocide, honour killing, and human rights abuses were not merely scholarly topics for academic journals and interviews, but issues that personally and conscientiously concerned him.

The invasion of Iraq by the Allied forces in 2003, which created a dangerous unrest from which the country still reels, is another recurrent subject in Professor Hassanpour's publications. During that fateful year, he was interviewed twenty-seven times by both the Canadian and foreign media, seeking his readings of the event, the outcome of the invasion, and its inherent dangers. As an authority on Kurdish questions, his focus in the interviews was on the Kurds of Iraq, yet without neglecting the fate the entire country faced during the invasion. An article by him on the infamous Anfal campaign is also worth mentioning, and although its content was not available for consultation by the present writer,¹¹ one can easily imagine the greatest devastations suffered by the Iraqi Kurds and other native people as a consequence of the systematic destructions brought about by that campaign. In 1988, in the region east of the Euphrates in Upper Iraq, the Iraqi army dynamited scores of Kurdish and Christian villages: houses, mosques, mausoleums, and churches. Standing before heaps of stones,¹² one is overwhelmed by the cruelty perpetrated on innocent inhabitants and against their livelihood, heritages, and cultures. The government of the time replaced the villages once built with large blocks of stones—landmark of Kurdish towns and villages—with new settlements built with concrete along a highway to facilitate the control of the population.

In addition to being a prolific writer, Professor Hassanpour was also a remarkable educator, whose popularity was appreciated nationwide at least once. *Maclean's Guide to Canadian Universities* 2006, in assessing the performance of all Canadian universities in teaching, counted Professor Hassanpour among the “PopularProfs” within the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations.¹³ Although student evaluations for his years at the University of Toronto were not available to the present writer, Professor Hassanpour's reputation as an effective educator echoes in all the courses that he taught and that he himself created. The syllabus of each course reflects its designer's depth and breadth in educational matters and knowledge. His courses pertained to his major academic interests: *Social Movements and Civil Society in the Middle East, Middle Eastern Mass Media, Turkey and Iran in the Twentieth Century, Contemporary Iraq, Violence and Civil Society in the Middle East, and Nationalism, Ethnicity and Minority Rights*. He ingeniously exposed his students to the expertise of outside speakers of various aspects of learning, with the result that he not only aroused his students' attention and curiosity, but also widened their intellectual horizons and expanded their knowledge. In 2008, the present writer participated in the *Nationalism, Ethnicity and Minority Rights* course in which primary sources of ethnic groups, including sources from Syriac and Christian Arabic, were read and analyzed. The instructor was an outstanding moderator who infused the discussions with his expertise in the Kurdish oral and written heritages, a fact that turned the two-hour session into an excellent learning experience. It is therefore unsurprising to read in the statement of an appreciative former student that Professor Hassanpour “was a great prof. His classes were fascinating, and I'll never forget him.”¹⁴ This statement sums up the quality of a teacher who was able to communicate his knowledge to students efficiently and professionally.

Just as Professor Hassanpour had created new undergraduate courses pertaining to Middle Eastern studies, he also designed a graduate course, which eventually became fundamental for graduate students enrolled in Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations. The course entitled *Theory*

and Method in Middle Eastern Studies discusses such topics as the history of the discipline, the emergence of Oriental Studies in Europe and North America, and the historical connections between the discipline and other academic fields.

Professor Hassanpour displayed willingness and ability in departmental administration, serving between 2004 and 2009 in three committees: Undergraduate Affairs Committee, the Teaching Evaluation Committee, and the Committee on Promotion to Librarian III Status. At the same time, he held three editorial positions in international publishing establishments located in the USA, the Netherlands, and Sweden, and was also a member of three Kurdish Studies advisory boards and committees situated in the USA, Germany, and Sweden. As expected from teaching faculty, Professor Hassanpour was a member of doctoral theses committees, and served as an advisor to several Master's degree students.

In short, within ten years at the Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, Professor Hassanpour had published two books and thirty-eight articles and chapters, delivered twenty-five lectures, fourteen of them by invitation, and gave fifteen talks to various communities; he was interviewed more than a hundred times by Canadian and foreign radio and television, and served as consultant to no less than twelve foreign and Canadian organizations, including Canadian governmental departments. In all these impressive achievements, Professor Hassanpour was original, talented, and multidisciplinary; an individual, who greatly contributed to scholarship and to communicating knowledge to academics and to the public at large. If we add the fact that he was generous, gentle, and respectful of even those who did not agree with him, one would not hesitate to deem him unique.

¹ This book was translated into Turkish and published: Ibrahim Bingol and Cemil Gundogan (translators), *Kurdistan'da Milliyetçilik ve Dil, 1918-1985* (Istanbul: Avesta Publishers, 2005).

² This book was solicited by Curzon Press, United Kingdom.

³ Amir Hassanpour, "The Politics of a-Political Linguistics: Linguists and Linguicide," in Robert Phillipson (ed.), *Rights to Language: Equity, Power and Education* (2000), p. 33-39.

⁴ The manuscript is at the Library of Manuscripts in Baghdad, No. 18078; see Amir Harrak, *Catalogue of Syriac and Garshuni Manuscripts: Manuscripts Owned by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities and Heritage*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Subsidia, 126 (Peeters: Leuven, 2011), p. 28-34; id., "Kurdish Garshuni in a 19th Century Syriac Manuscript," in Johannes den Heijer, Andrea B. Schmidt & Tamar Pataridze (eds), *Scripts Beyond Borders: A Survey of Allographic Traditions in the Euro-Mediterranean World*, Publications de l'Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, vol. 62 (Louvain-la-Neuve, 2013), p. 135-150.

⁵ Maurizio Garzoni, P., *Grammatica e vocabolario della lingua kurda*. Roma: Nella Stamperia della Sacra Congregazione di Propaganda Fide, 1787; <http://www.institutkurde.org/biblioth/livres/gramgar.htm>.

⁶ This grammar is especially valuable being a witness of a specific Kurdish dialect in geographical and chronological terms.

⁷ Amir Hassanpour, "Kurdi wek zimaneki cut-standard [Kurdish as a bi-standard language]," *Rojname* 206 (2008), p. 11.

⁸ Amir Hassanpour and Shahrzad Mojab, "The Dangers of Iran's Holocaust Denial," *The Toronto Star* (February 14, 2006).

⁹ Amir Hassanpour, "Ninety Years Later: The Armenian Genocide Continues," CTV news (also translated into French) 11-05-2005.

¹⁰ Shahrzad Mojab and Amir Hassanpour, "Thoughts on the Struggle against 'Honor Killing,'" *The International Journal of Kurdish Studies* 16, ½ (2002), p. 94.

¹¹ Amir Hassanpour, "Berew têgeyiştin ū berberekanî kiridinî Enfal," A Documentation and Research Magazine 1(2000), p. 10-20.

¹² In the late 1990s I visited that region searching for inscriptions for my project on Syriac epigraphy.

¹³ "University of Toronto: PopularProfs," *Maclean's Guide to Canadian Universities* (2006), p. 139.

¹⁴ <http://windsorstar.com/news/local-news/kurdish-scholar-former-u-of-w-prof-succumbs-to-cancer>.