



A Climatic Re-reading of the 'Persian Garden'

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An extensive body of scholarly discourse about the history of gardens has formed around terms that ascribe a distinct spatial entity to a specific ethnicity, race, or nation-state. This paper reevaluates one such conceptualization, the 'Persian garden', to elucidate how these terms may be ideologically loaded and how these implications intertwine with other layers to justify themselves. Over the past century, the 'Persian garden' has been solidified as a distinct concept, representing an earthly paradise that is in stark contrast to its surrounding 'desert'. This conceptualization is deeply entangled with colonialist, imperialist, and nationalist ideologies and has used climatic justifications to perpetuate itself. The paper first explores the discourse around this concept, particularly in its association with climate, and assesses the general climatic regime underpinning this discourse, questioning its accountability in light of contemporary climatic concerns. Reading the 'Persian garden' through the lens of mitigation is impractical and insufficient in addressing climatic issues tied to adaptation. The ideological roots of the climatic regime that are attributed to the 'Persian garden' reveal how these ideologies, with this conceptualization, have steered the trajectory of scholarship on the history of gardens in the Iranian plateau, obstructing genuine critical analyses. By exposing these ideological layers, the paper challenges the 'Persian garden' concept and advocates for a fresh approach to the history of gardens in the region.

Keywords: Persian gardens; *chaharbagh*; nationalism; colonialism; Imperialism



Introduction

Despite the extensive scholarship on the subject, there has been little critical analysis of the ‘Persian (or Iranian) garden’ as a constructed concept and of the ideologies that shaped it, especially in relation to climate.¹ The concept of the ‘Persian garden’ has often been accepted without question, leading scholarship on the history of gardens in the region to overlook important critical aspects, especially those concerning power and the environment.

Early scholarship includes the foundational work by Arthur Pope and Phyllis Ackerman (1938), who link the ‘Persian garden’ to other forms of Persian art. Donald Wilber (1979) studies various gardens across Iran, emphasizing the pavilion, or the *kushk*, as the main and usually central building of these gardens.² Ralph Pinder-Wilson (1972) focuses on the garden’s formal structure within the framework of the *chaharbagh* and its connection to Islamic gardens, defining *chaharbagh* as ‘a rectangular walled garden quartered by two streams intersecting at right angles’ (1972: 79), which later became an inseparable part of the ‘Persian garden’ concept.

Later influential studies build on these foundations. The extensive research on Safavid gardens by Mahvash Alemi (1997; 2007) focuses on the relationship between these gardens and power. Maria Eva Subtelny (1997), through her work on a historical manuscript on gardening titled *Irshad al-zira*, provides a significant connection between the ‘Persian garden’ and the spatial structure of *chaharbagh* in a more precise way. Following this topic from another perspective, Mehdi Khansari, Minouch Yavari, and Mohammadreza Moghtader (1998) explore the symbolic implications of the ‘Persian garden’ as an ‘echo of paradise’ within Zoroastrian and Islamic conceptions of heaven. Finally, Mohammad Gharipour’s work (2013) primarily examines the pavilions of these gardens, interpreting them in relation to other forms of arts including Persian miniatures, literature, and poetry.

Persian literature on the topic also abounds. Mohammadkarim Pirnia (1994; 2002) discusses the fundamental principles that define a ‘Persian garden’, and Azadeh Shahcheraghi (2010) critiques modern cities, advocating for a revival of the ‘Persian garden’ model suitable for contemporary urban contexts. Gholamreza Naeema (2014) combines philosophical interpretations to explain the design of ‘Persian gardens’, based on extensive fieldwork.

Most of the studies mentioned emphasize, both implicitly and explicitly, the climatic ‘features’ of the ‘Persian garden’ — the favorable conditions these gardens create in contrast to their surroundings. However, recent research by scholars like Morteza Ojaghlou and Mehdi Khakzand (2019), Honey Fadaie and Majid Mofidi (2014), and

Mohamed Yusoff Abbas et al. (2016) has pushed this interpretation further by adopting an empirical approach to studying these spaces. By examining various case studies and building upon earlier assessments of the environmental advantages of the 'Persian garden', these studies generally conclude that this concept offers an ideal solution to contemporary climatic challenges. They substantiate this conclusion with empirical data that indicates that these gardens provide a more comfortable atmosphere for residents than the surrounding desert landscape.

This paper takes an interdisciplinary approach, combining textual analysis of key scholarly works, archival research, and a critical review of climate literature on the 'Persian garden'. A close reading of foundational works and dominant interpretations that have shaped this concept reveals the common understanding of it in scholarly works. Arguing that climate plays a crucial role in this narrative, I then critically assess the climatic regime and the mindset underlying the 'Persian garden' by utilizing contemporary theories of power and the environment to deconstruct this concept, particularly its portrayal as an ideal model by which to address our climate concerns. When foundational works are understood within their historical contexts, supported by archival research, we can better understand the ideologies driving their narratives and the significance of climate in their formation. I will also trace the colonial and nationalist layers within this reading of gardens in the region, exploring how these ideologies are interconnected with climate.

By examining the climatic and ideological dimensions of the 'Persian garden', this paper contributes to the fields of architectural history, environmental humanities, and postcolonial studies. It challenges the dominant scholarly view of the 'Persian garden' as a timeless, ecologically ideal archetype, arguing instead that its construction is deeply rooted in colonial and nationalist ideologies. This critique positions the paper within postcolonial studies. It also introduces a climate-based perspective for analyzing gardens in the region, emphasizing that the history of these gardens — often viewed solely through an aesthetic lens — must also be examined in terms of resource extraction, land exploitation, and labor politics. This aspect connects my paper to environmental humanities. Finally, this paper calls for a more nuanced historiography of gardens in the Iranian plateau, one that transcends the reductive frameworks produced by nationalism and colonialism to embrace the region's complex socio-political and environmental history. In doing so, the current study serves as a corrective to previous architectural histories on gardens, underscoring the need to reexamine these landscapes in the light of environmental humanities and postcolonial studies.

The Theory of the ‘Persian Garden’

The theory surrounding what is referred to as the ‘Persian garden’ has been built on three genres of textual resources: agricultural manuals that offer prescriptive guidelines on the construction of gardens; travelogs that provide descriptive accounts of gardens within the broader context of urban fabric and society; and the more theoretical post-20th-century texts that employ the previous texts as their evidence for defining the ‘Persian garden’ while also occasionally interpreting and analyzing it. While all these texts mostly address both pre-Islamic gardens (500 BC–700 AD) and those built subsequent to the Islamic conquest of the region, they were composed during the latter period. Tracing the theoretical basis of the ‘Persian garden’ in pre-Islamic texts is particularly challenging, due to factors such as the transition of official languages from Pahlavi to Arabic, numerous wars, and the destruction of major libraries during these wars. Consequently, reconstructing the intellectual underpinnings of the ‘Persian garden’ concept from pre-Islamic texts is currently an insurmountable undertaking.

Among the agricultural manuals that have significantly influenced the theoretical construction of the ‘Persian garden’ concept, *Irshad al-zira* (A Guide for Agriculture) is particularly noteworthy. Composed in 1515 by Qasim B. Yusuf Abu Nasri, this manual, unlike other manuals, incorporates information on the gardens within a specific agricultural and potentially architectural framework (Subtelny 1997). Abu Nasri’s manual is structured into eight chapters, referred to as *rauza* (literally, gardens). The initial seven chapters delineate various cultivations tailored for different plants, while the final chapter is dedicated to a garden’s layout, particularly the *chaharbagh* layout for gardens (**Figure 1**). As will be demonstrated, this particular layout subsequently becomes an integral part of the theoretical discourse surrounding the ‘Persian garden’, despite the absence of the explicit term ‘Persian garden’ in the manual.

The second genre of texts, those authored by Europeans or Iranian individuals from the privileged social strata, offers firsthand descriptive accounts of these gardens, many of which were subsequently demolished before the turn of the 20th century. At the same time, these works represent the first product of European writers’ encounters with these gardens. Writing in the early 15th century, Ruy González de Clavijo, for instance, portrays Tehran as a city full of gardens and without surrounding walls (González de Clavijo 1965: 175). Likewise, in the 17th century, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier describes Hezar Jarib gardens in Isfahan as remarkably beautiful, albeit not as significant as the gardens in France (Tavernier 2004: 615). Travelogs by ‘native’ Iranians provide more detailed accounts of the gardens, such as that by Mohammadhassan ibn Ali Etemadolsaltaneh, titled *Meratolbaladan* (Mirror of Cities). Written in 1877, it portrays a vast garden featuring a building at its summit and two straight streets that meet

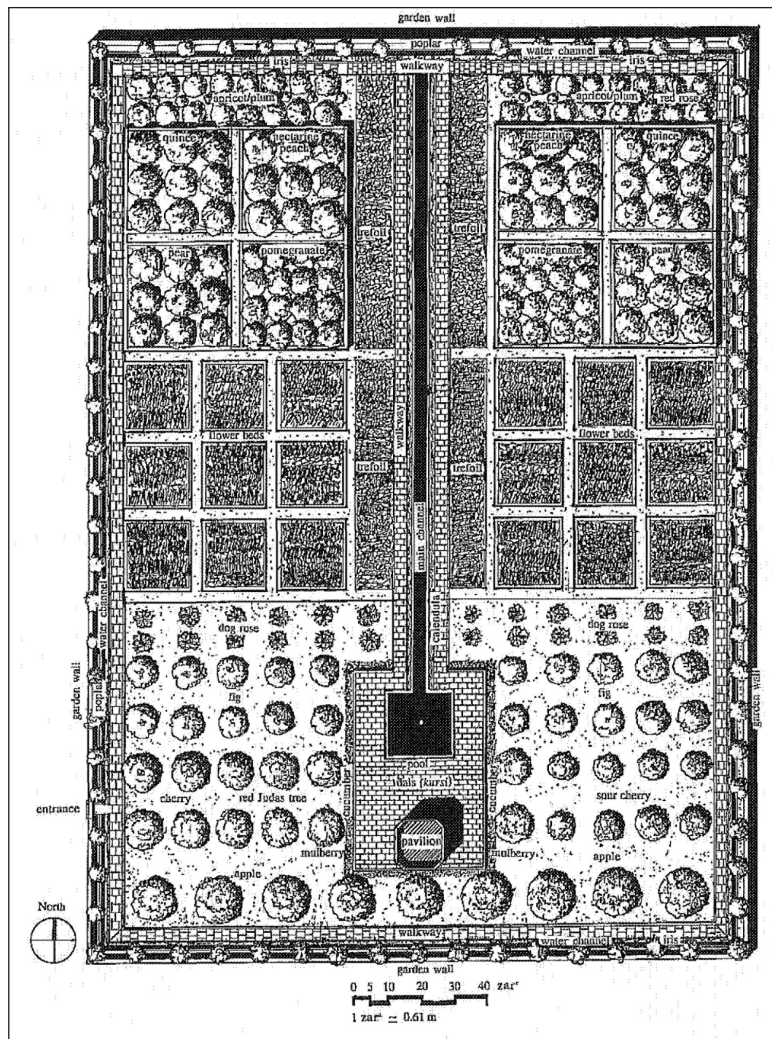


Figure 1: Reconstruction of the entire layout of the Timurid *chaharbagh*, based on chapter 8 of the *Irshad al-zira*. At the heart of the garden lies a central water channel, leading from the main entrance to a pavilion (*kushk*) on the southern end, which overlooks a pool. Drawing by Wiktor Moskaliuk, from Subtelny (1997: 127). Courtesy of Brill Publishing House.

each other at that building (1877: 1013). Forsat Shirazi's *Asar-e Ajam* (Iranian Works), of 1893, vividly illustrates Nazar Garden in Shiraz (Figure 2), presenting a nuanced perspective on its features.

Referred to interchangeably as the city garden or government garden, this particular garden served as the location for the throne and was designed by Vakil Shirazi. At its core lies a *kolah farangi* [*kushk*], designed for all seasons, surrounded by four substantial pools positioned on each side of the building. Notably, the late Hosseinali Mirza Farmanfarma has erected a tall palace adorned entirely with mirrors in the northwest of the garden. (Shirazi 1893: 831)



Figure 2: The *kushk* (*kolah farangi* or pavilion) and one of the pools within Nazar Garden in Shiraz, which is considered a notable example of the ‘Persian garden’. This garden has undergone significant changes over the years, particularly in terms of horticulture, such as the temporary addition of flower pots around the pool. These interventions in the garden highlight the critical role of historical texts like travelogs and agricultural manuals in writing the history of gardens. Today, Nazar Garden is known as Pars Museum, housing a collection of artifacts from pre-Islamic and Islamic eras. Photo by Ehssan Hanif, 2017.

While the travelogs and agricultural manuals played a significant role in shaping subsequent theories about the ‘Persian garden’, the term ‘Persian garden’ remains conspicuously absent from them. Even Joseph Pitton de Tournefort, a botanist known for his controversial approach of associating certain practices with distinct racial groups, did not use the term when comparing Persian and Turk gardeners. In his 1717 work, he notes that ‘in Persia, the Trees are planted by line; and their Parterres are well disposed and managed’ (Tournefort 1717, 2: 248).

The category of contemporary academic text that has itself become part of the literature on the ‘Persian garden’ is exemplified by Pope and Ackerman’s influential work, *A Survey of Persian Art*, in which the term ‘Persian garden’ first appears. At the end of the first chapter in the second volume of their book, in an article called ‘Gardens’, they bring up and address questions about the ‘Persian garden’, including its definition,

The Persian garden was almost always formally planned under an abstract and usually quite rigid scheme ... The palace buildings were concentrated in a transverse oblong at one end, with a square garden precisely in the center between the two groups of edifices. (Pope and Ackerman 1938: 1434)

The authors point to Farahabad Garden in Isfahan as an example (**Figure 3**).

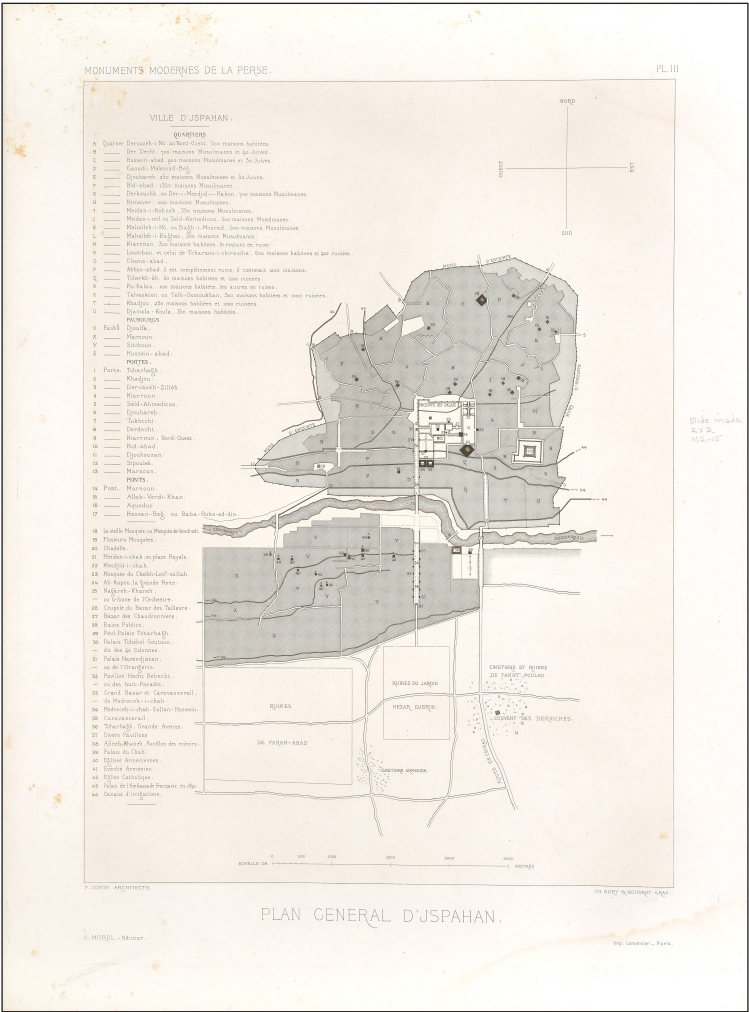


Figure 3: General map of Isfahan and ruins of Farahabad Garden in the city's southern part in 1840. As this older map shows, by the time Pope and Ackerman wrote their piece on the 'Persian garden', only the ruins of Farahabad Garden remained, meaning that their understanding relied heavily on archaeological findings rather than direct observation. Drawing by Pascal Coste, 1867, from Coste (1867: plate III). Smithsonian Digital Archive.

Pope and Ackerman initiate their exploration of the ‘Persian garden’ by investigating various forms of ‘Persian’ art, including pottery, poetry, carpets, and music. They then compare the ‘Persian garden’ with other gardens, claiming that ‘the need for a garden is more deeply rooted, more articulate, and more universal in Persia than Japanese passion for flowers or the English love of country. It is the central notion of the Iranian Weltanschauung’ (Pope and Ackerman 1938: 1428). This marks the first use of the term ‘Persian garden’ to denote a landscape that manifests a worldview that differentiates ‘Persians’ from others. Since Pope and Ackerman’s introduction of the term in 1938, an extensive body of scholarship developed, popularizing and reinforcing the acceptance and usage of the term ‘Persian garden’. The goal of this scholarship, while heavily reliant on former agricultural manuals and travelogs, in contrast to those texts, was to provide more analysis and interpretation of gardens in Iran within the framework of the term ‘Persian garden’. In essence, a historical narrative of gardens was constructed with its roots in Pope and Ackerman’s work, as the following discussion will explore.

The Making of the ‘Persian Garden’

After Pope and Ackerman, scholars like Pinder-Wilson (1972) and Wilber (1979) played pivotal roles in not only establishing the use of the term ‘Persian garden’ but also shaping a reading of the history of gardens in the Iranian plateau that endures to this day. According to this reading, the history of the ‘Persian garden’ begins with the Achaemenid Empire (550 BC–330 BC) and continues to the Qajar Dynasty (1789–1925) and spans the vast geography of the Iranian plateau, from present-day India and Iraq to the northern reaches of Africa (Pinder-Wilson 1972: 73) and from the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf.

In the southwest of Iran, Pasargad Garden, constructed around 500 BC, is the oldest site to which the concept of the ‘Persian garden’ is applied (Khansari et al. 1998: 38). Drawing from a formal interpretation of this site and earlier texts, scholars after Pope and Ackerman propose that the essential form of a ‘Persian garden’ is a large square divided into four smaller squares with a *kushk*, a central building, at the intersection of two crossing streets. This layout can result in four equally sized main squares, as seen in the Jahannama Garden in Shiraz, or, if the *kushk* is closer to one edge, two elongated and two smaller squares, as in the Shazdeh Garden in Mahan (**Figures 4, 5**). The *kushk*, at the heart of the garden, offers panoramic views of different garden sections, particularly the main entrance (**Figure 6**), while a water canal connects the building to the entrance; horticulture remains an integral component of these gardens (Soltanzadeh 2010). In essence, this reading posits that the defining feature of the ‘Persian garden’ is the *chaharbagh* layout, a typical design noted in earlier texts, such as *Irshad al-zira* (Subtelny 1997).

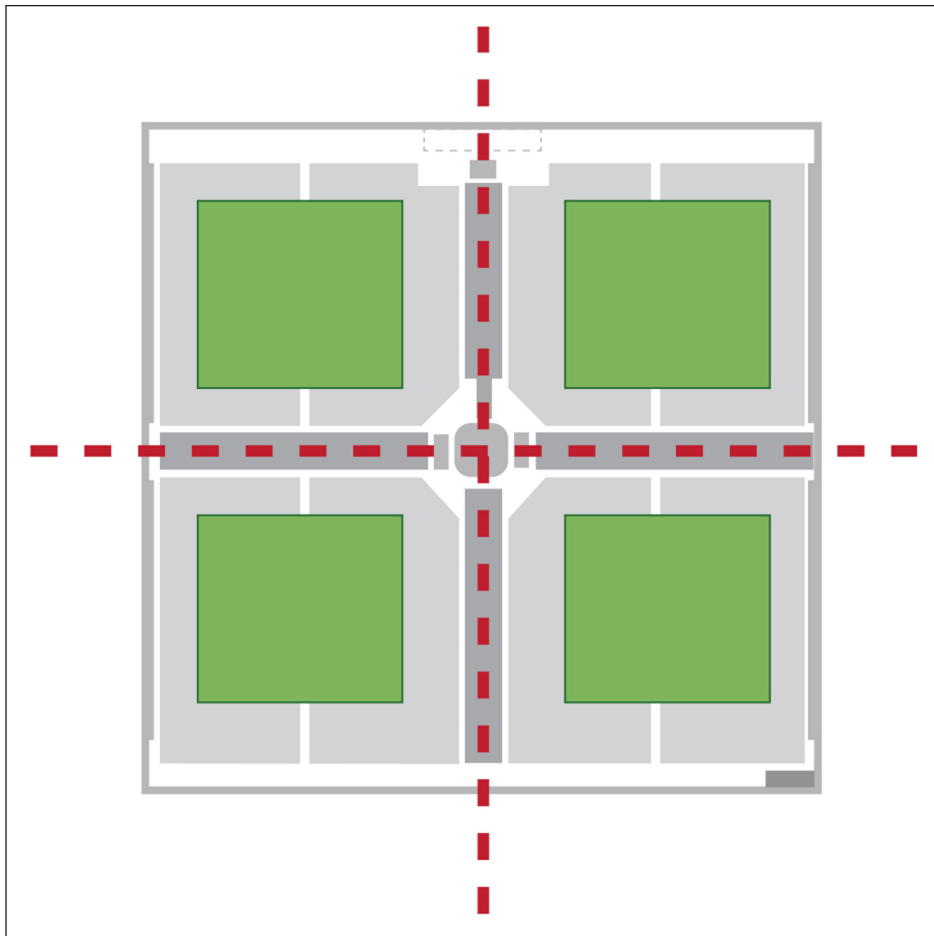


Figure 4: Division of the garden into four squares. This diagram shows the simplest division, based on Jahannama Garden, Shiraz. Diagram by Ehssan Hanif.

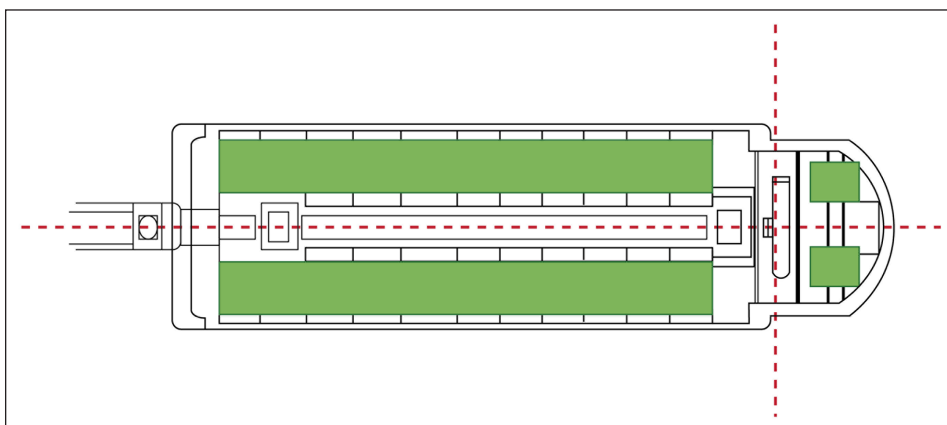


Figure 5: This diagram is a stretched version of the division of the garden into four squares, based on Shazdeh Garden, Mahan. Diagram by Ehssan Hanif, based on a map in the Archive of the Iranian Ministry of Culture.

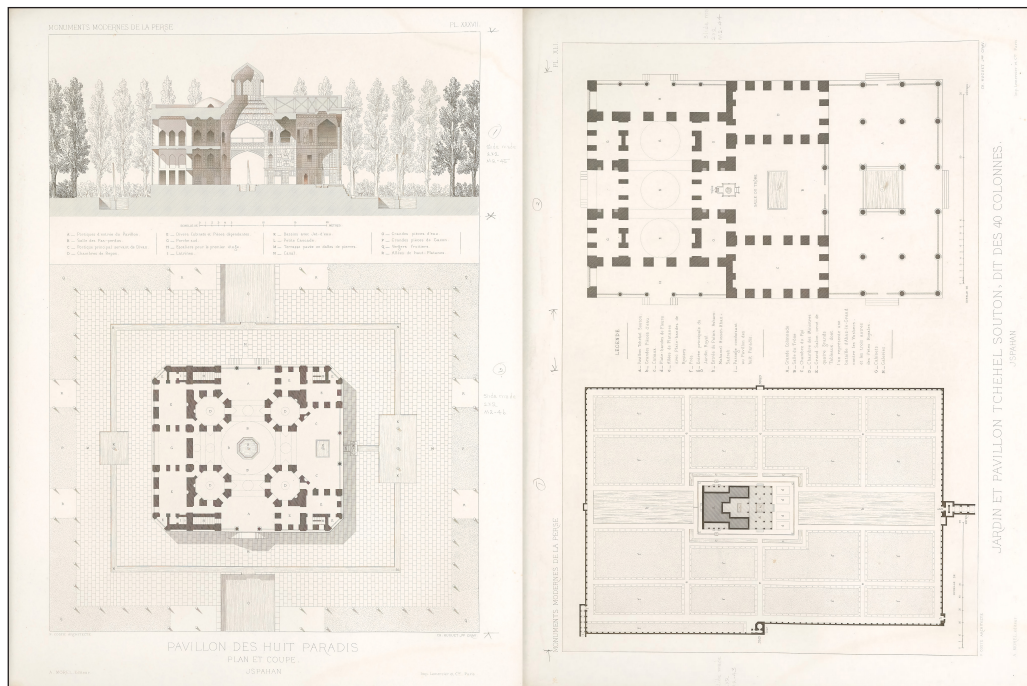


Figure 6: The central position of the *kushk* and its position in two gardens known as ‘Persian gardens’. In both cases, as is evident in the layout, the *kushk* is designed to be open to its surroundings, providing a panoramic view. Left: Chehelsotoon Garden, Isfahan; right: Hashbehesht Garden, Isfahan. Drawing by Pascal Coste, 1867, from Coste (1867: plates XLI, XXXVII). Smithsonian Digital Archive.

To justify its interpretation over 2,500 years of history and across the geography of the Iranian plateau and beyond, this narrative of the ‘Persian garden’ has, over time, incorporated a blend of symbolic and climatic layers to its initial formal theory. Within the symbolic layer, as scholars such as Leila Mahmoudi Farahani, Bahareh Motamed, and Elmira Jamei (2016) argue, the four-fold division of the ‘Persian garden’ may originate from the four Zoroastrian elements (water, wind, fire, and soil), a symbolism that persisted after the Islamic conquest as an embodiment of the ‘four heavenly streams’.

Such a reading of the climatic layer of the ‘Persian garden’ treats the whole Iranian plateau as an expansive ‘desert’, attributing a single climatic state to the entire region. Through homogenizing climatic characteristics, the reading aligns itself with the climatic conditions of this imagined ‘desert’, thereby asserting its overarching veracity. In the inaugural passages of his seminal work on the ‘Persian garden’, Wilber, a pioneering scholar in this field, begins his influential treatise as follows:

Throughout the Islamic centuries, from the Arab conquest of Iran until the present day, their gardens have represented images of paradise to the Persians. Beyond

question, it was the fact that the plateau has always been relatively arid and treeless that gave the gardens such a supreme value. The origin of the life-giving aspect of gardens may go back to the most remote periods [as early as 4000 BC]. (1979: 3)

The ‘Persian garden’ thus acquires a dual significance through the amalgamation of symbolic with climatic interpretations. It not only symbolizes paradise on earth but also functions practically, as a manifestation of that idyllic realm within the constructed expanse of the ‘imagined desert’. This nuanced duality essentializes the concept of the ‘Persian garden’, thereby complicating any profound critique directed toward gardens in the Iranian plateau, as each is perceived as a paradise on the earth. While some scholars have attempted to challenge the part of this reading that reduces the layout of *chaharbagh* to simply one of the attributes of ‘Persian gardens’, it remains clear that any exploration into the history of gardens on the Iranian plateau invariably filters itself through this prevalent reading. Alemi, for example, who offers a comprehensive critique of the power dynamics and space in Safavid gardens and argues that these gardens should be read based on ‘the kinds of practices in nature they allowed’ (2007: 123), avoids analyzing the ‘Persian garden’ concept in terms of either its symbolic or climatic aspects.

The climatic aspects inherent in the ‘Persian garden’ concept are rooted in this prevailing reading of the garden as a paradise on earth, facilitating its perpetuation. Two distinct domains of the ‘Persian garden’ concept — the irrigation system and horticulture — are intertwined with climatic considerations, and unraveling these will expose the overarching climatic regime within which this concept persists. Ideological forces have also contributed to the misrepresentations embedded in this concept. The motivations underlying these ideologies demonstrate not only how the entire region is treated as an extensive ‘desert’ but also how the entire history of gardens in the region has been reduced to the history of the ‘Persian garden’. This misrepresentation bears imprints of colonialist and nationalist influences — the source of the construction of the ‘Persian garden’ as a concept.

Irrigation System

Inspecting water management for and in the ‘Persian garden’ through the lens of theories on the relationship between imperial powers and nature reveals that contrary to the dominant narrative’s suggestions, these gardens have used water, often in an embellished manner, as an apparatus for asserting the authority of imperial rulers. For gardens across the Iranian plateau, water plays a prominent role, as it does for many gardens. Hydraulic features in gardens of the Iranian plateau include main rivers, side

rivers, canals, *seeneh kaftari* stones (which create an aural and visual illusion), *abgardans* (for circulating water underground), clay water pipes, fountains, *shotorgaloos* (for moving water horizontally), stepped waterfronts, and pools, all to circulate water and thus to supposedly ‘enhance the garden’s atmospheric qualities’ (Vayghan, 2020). These atmospheric qualities may practically enhance ventilation and cool the air (Soltanzadeh and Soltanzadeh 2017). Complementing these individual features, which are found within a garden, is an extensive infrastructural canal system known as *kariz*, or *qanat* (**Figure 7**), which serves as a conduit for snow-fed underground water to reach the gardens (Khansari et al. 1998: 24). The result is a sophisticated and elaborate system to supply water from either long or short distances to the interior of a garden.

While the *qanat* system was used across the Iranian plateau’s various climatic regions, it held unparalleled importance in the central hot, arid areas, where it became the primary method by which to secure access to water for gardens. Empirical evidence underscores the profound role of hydraulic systems in reducing the ambient temperature within gardens situated in hot, arid areas (Fadaie and Mofidi 2014; Fadaie et al. 2020; Habibi et al. 2020). These empirical observations, coupled with the portrayal of the

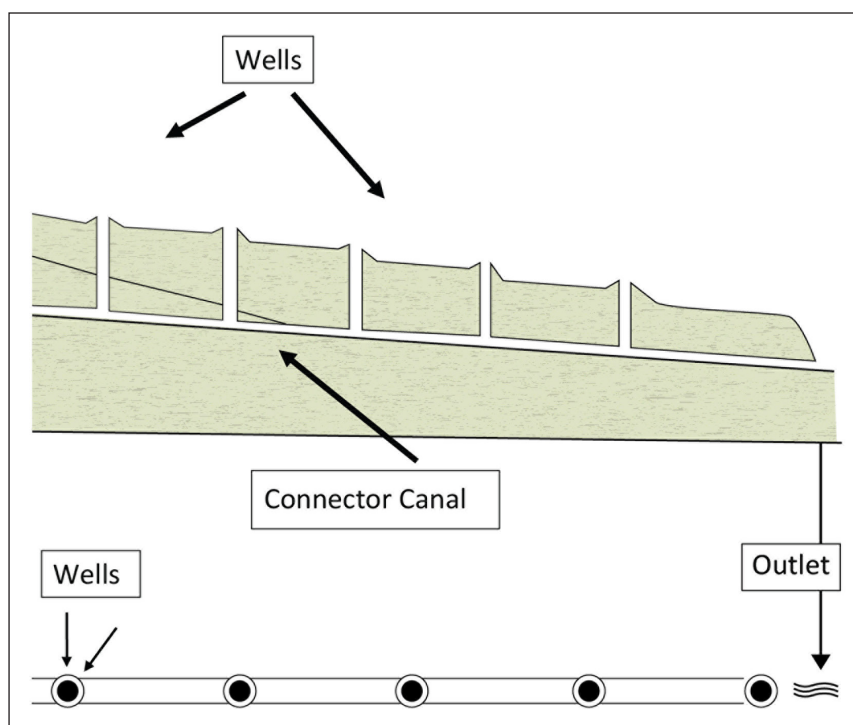


Figure 7: Section (top) and plan (bottom) of a *qanat*, a vertical well that collects surface water and channels it to the underground connector canal. The gently sloping connector canals transport water from higher elevations to downhill outlets, supplying gardens and cities while minimizing evaporation. Drawing by Ehssan Hanif.

‘Persian garden’ as a paradise, have persuaded many writers to perpetuate the image of the ‘Persian garden’ as a distinctive entity in contrast with the ‘desert’ by which it is supposedly surrounded. A central claim among proponents of this idea is that ‘despite the chaotic nature of the surrounding environment, Iranians with a special design method managed to bring peace and pure calmness to the space’ of the Iranian garden (Javadi and Vasigh 2022). In this reading, the power to utilize water for cooling the gardens situated in the ‘desert’ of the Iranian plateau positions the ‘Persian garden’ as the epitome of paradise on Earth, seemingly impervious to any critique. However, inherent complexities within this conceptualization are revealed when it is set within a broader perspective.

Despite its potential for water preservation, the entire irrigation system of these gardens, especially in the hot and arid areas of the Iranian plateau, functions as an apparatus primarily serving the comfort of a select few residents — predominantly members of the royal court or privileged local families allied with the ruling authorities. The concept of the ‘Persian garden’ and the complex innovations in water collection, irrigation, and drainage were thus tools wielded by those in power to ‘produce their own nature’ through ‘physical improvement of the conditions by shaping land, draining, irrigation, and circulating water’, much like the same framework of Raymond Williams’s discussion in *The Country and the City* (1975: 122–23). This production of a new nature endowed the ruler with a divine power, materializing their imperial dominion over nature.

Yet this dominion over water resources extended beyond the mere control of nature. Control over water served as a mechanism to suppress potential uprisings against authority, a similar role to that of a US governmental project in 1902 in the arid West of the USA (Worster 2006). The ability to construct a paradisiacal garden within a seemingly barren ‘desert’ not only showcased imperial superiority but also legitimized their rule over other territories and the beings living there,

a superiority evinced by the mastery of nature they had gained through their scientific discoveries and the power that their technological advancement gave them to wage war, conquer time and space and tap hitherto unknown or scarcely used resources of the earth. (Adas 1993: 14)

Thus, the primary objective underlying the strategic utilization of water within the paradigm of the ‘Persian garden’ transcended merely creating a ‘pleasant’ environment for its inhabitants. The hydraulic technologies not only represented a command over natural elements but were also tangible expressions of imperial mechanisms, delineating a sense of supremacy over the common populace as the ‘other’. In line with

Williams's framework of a city in nature, manmade nature in the 'Persian garden', functioning as the epicenter (the 'city' in Williams's discourse), is defined through its deliberate contrast with the non-regal sectors of society, encompassing both the natural environment and the rest of human society (Williams's 'country'). The 'Persian garden' thus becomes a microcosm of power. Consequently, the manipulation of water as a natural resource in the 'Persian garden' resonated with imperialistic ideologies of conquering lands and people, and the watering technologies embedded within these gardens were instruments by which this overarching ideology of imperial supremacy was reinforced.

Horticulture

By fostering a manmade greenspace, horticulture plays a pivotal role in demarcating a garden as separate from its natural environment. Horticulture can also function as a deliberate mechanism of imperial distinction, a way by which to foster a controlled environment of 'exclusive inclusion' that mirrors the garden's political and ecological dominance over not just its surrounding 'desert-like' landscape but human society.

The significance of horticulture within the realm of gardens becomes clear through the agricultural manuals, invaluable resources for studying the history of gardens. Consequently, scholarly discussions on the 'Persian garden' have accorded considerable attention to horticulture. Pirnia, a renowned architectural historian, positions horticulture as one of the three principal orders — alongside irrigation and construction — that form the essence of the 'Persian garden', contending that the defining characteristics of a 'Persian garden' encompass the strategic assortment of fruitful and non-fruitful trees, the cultivation of evergreen specimens, the incorporation of medicinal shrubs, and a meticulous arrangement along main axes and streets (Pirnia 1994; 2002; Naeema 2014; Shahcheraghi 2010). Moreover, plantings in the 'Persian garden' often feature willows, plane trees, poplars, and vineyards alongside terraces, aromatic flowers, and fruit-bearing trees (Subtelny 1997). These gardens also employ dense plantings along walls, hiding the garden boundaries to create the illusion of an expansive space extending toward the mountains on the horizon (Alemi 2007). Hence, within the confines of the 'Persian garden', the cultivation of diverse plant species, at a high density, is orchestrated to establish a pronounced contrast between the lush interior and the area beyond — a contrast that captures the dichotomy between an inner sanctuary and an external 'imagined desert'.

This distinct attribute, coupled with the conceptualization of the 'Persian garden' as a paradisiacal space, has led numerous scholars to adopt a positivist approach and to seek empirical evidence that substantiates the 'sustainability' and ecological 'efficiency'

of the ‘Persian garden’ as a greenspace (e.g., Ojaghlou and Khakzand 2019; Fadaie and Mofidi 2014; Yusoff et al. 2016; Khalilnezhad and Tobias 2016; Khademi et al. 2013; Fadaie et al. 2020). To support their arguments, these authors have had to presuppose the surroundings of the gardens they studied as an imagined, expansive desert, thereby perpetuating the same misrepresentation of the region. The quantitative evaluations in these studies suggest that the horticulture within the ‘Persian garden’, along with its formal structure and hydraulic technologies, has produced a self-sufficient microcosm inside the garden. However, adopting a fresh perspective on horticulture in the ‘Persian garden’ challenges this assertion and its foundational assumption.

While the ‘Persian garden’ was a repository for a diverse array of plant species, many were not indigenous to the garden’s climatic context and were introduced from distant regions by various empires. Historical evidence, particularly from the Achaemenid (6th–4th centuries BC) and Safavid Empires (16th–18th centuries), confirms that transferring plants to and from other regions was common practice (Motedayen and Motedayen 2016; Motedayen 2011). In part, this practice was intended to attract a variety of wildlife, including birds, butterflies, and insects (Khalilnezhad and Tobias 2016). It appears to have been a selective process by which to bring every ‘worthwhile’ form of life into the garden. The process, however, involved the marginalization of lives — wildlife or humankind — deemed unworthy of preservation. The unselected lives, whether local or not, by being excluded from the ‘Persian garden’ were relegated to a world outside its constructed paradise. The evident dichotomy between the garden’s interior and its surroundings made manifest through the selection of lives, a selection accentuated by fortified boundaries of walls or plantations, reveals a deliberate strategy of ‘exclusive inclusion’ (**Figure 8**). This segregation allowed the authorities to build an allegedly peaceful and calm (as the aforementioned reading calls it) exclusive space for themselves within the gardens. The fact that ordinary people were prohibited from accessing such gardens until the mid-16th century underscores this ‘exclusive inclusion’, which aims to segregate ordinary people and natural settings from selected people and plant species. The distinctive feature of the gardens that are considered ‘Persian’ from the 16th to the 18th centuries, during the Safavid period, is that they were ‘enclosed orchards laid out on a geometric plan’ (Alemi 1997: 75). In this sense, the exclusivity facilitated by intensive cultivation and fortified boundaries could be called a key characteristic that sets these gardens apart from others within the comparable context.

The exclusivity encapsulated by the great variety of lush plant life reinforces the notion that beyond the garden lies a ‘desert-like’, chaotic expanse devoid of value, ripe for exploration and conquest. What exists outside the garden represents, in Agamben’s terms, that which deserves only ‘bare life’, while within the garden exists the realm of

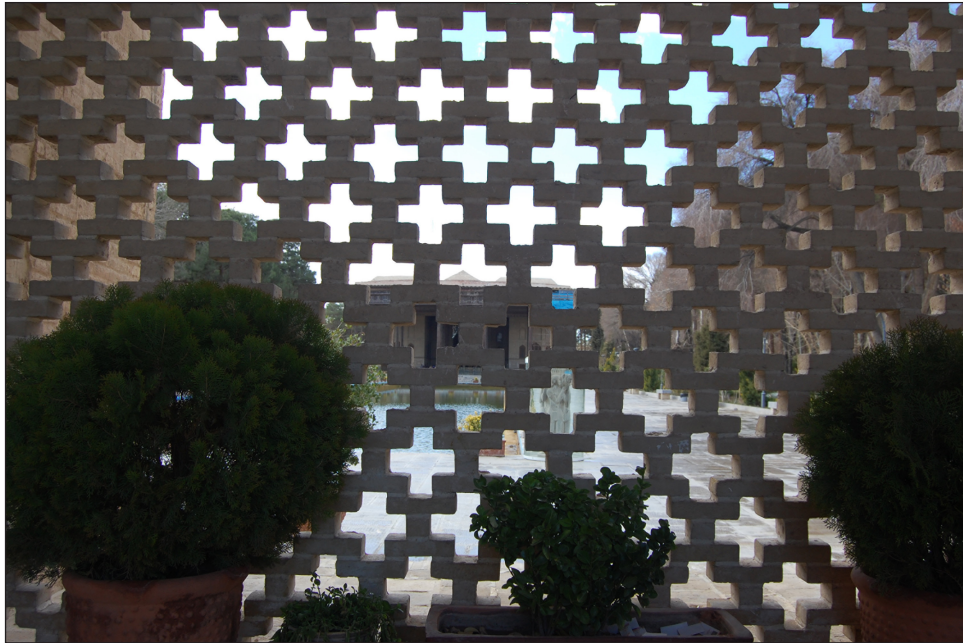


Figure 8: Meshed brick walls, a type of wall called *fakhr va modayn*, in Chehelsotoon Garden, Isfahan, that created a more enclosed environment for the imperial residents, separating them from the rest of city and the natural landscape. Photo by Ehssan Hanif, 2014.

‘political life’ (2013: 140). The ‘Persian garden’ thus mirrors contemporary examples highlighted by Laura Ruggeri, where ‘in order to succeed they must be bounded and isolated from the ordinary landscape’ (2008: 110). This ideology of exclusive inclusion, particularly in later stages of Imperialism, perpetuates the perception of the desert as an empty space awaiting occupation and exploitation, thereby facilitating its transformation, manipulation, toxification, destruction, and extraction (Henni 2022: 11). Essentially, this practice of exclusive inclusion lays the groundwork for the imperialistic exploitation of external territories to fulfill the needs of empires.

The Climatic Regime and the Concept of the ‘Persian Garden’

The ‘Persian garden’, with its elaborate irrigation systems and horticultural design, not only mirrors but also symbolizes an imperial ruler’s dominion over both nature and human society. Yet prevailing narratives portray the ‘Persian garden’ as a ‘paradise on earth’, which conceals its more complex aspects. This selective portrayal stems from a climatic regime. To unveil this underlying climatic regime, I will reexamine the concept of the ‘Persian garden’ in light of climate concerns. In alignment with social geographer Christian Parenti and anthropologist Gökçe Günel, I emphasize that the focal points of climate discourse encompass mitigation and adaptation. Accordingly, ‘mitigation means drastically cutting our production of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases

... and moving toward energy sources such as wind ... and adaptation means preparing to live with the effects of climate change' (Parenti 2012: 10). I add to this Günel's nuanced perspective that 'if climate change mitigation is about energy, adaptation is about water' (Günel 2016: 291). Despite the extensive scholarship on the climatically 'desirable' attributes of the 'Persian garden', the climatic regime inherent in the concept of the 'Persian garden' appears at odds with this discourse.

In terms of mitigation, despite the absence of apparent fossil fuel usage and associated greenhouse gas emissions in historical cases, a broader evaluation must consider potential fossil fuel consumption involved in possible contemporary constructions, infrastructure development, and the importation of diverse plant species necessary for such gardens. We must contextualize the 'Persian garden' concept within contemporary concerns and crises to evaluate its compatibility with the mitigation of greenhouse gases emissions or, more precisely, with the use of energy. Since there are no contemporary examples of such gardens, and existing studies have not adequately situated the 'Persian garden' concept within a contemporary framework, a true assessment in terms of mitigation remains unfeasible. The portrayal of the 'Persian garden' as climatically 'desirable' is thus unconvincing. However, as discussed, the strategies applied in these gardens primarily improve the immediate living conditions of its residents, sidestepping the overarching issue of climate change, which is more related to adaptation. This realization prompts a reevaluation of the 'Persian garden' concept in terms of adaptation, starting with Günel's definition of adaptation with issues related to water (2016: 291).

Access to vital resources is synonymous with power, and water, one of the most critical resources, has always played a crucial role in power dynamics. Accordingly, in the Iranian plateau securing a reliable water source for large-scale gardens was contingent on the owner's social status and influence (Polak 1989: 76). Moreover, as discussed, in the case of the 'Persian garden', a vast network of infrastructures was utilized to convey water to these gardens. This infrastructure network, exclusive to a select few, entails the deprivation of a substantial segment of society from water access. Consequently, drawing from Parenti's assertion, one might posit that the climatic regime of these gardens necessitates responses that involve 'arming, excluding, forgetting, repressing, and policing' in relation to the issue of water (2012: 11). Thus, the adaptive measures employed therein mirror the political adaptation akin to the contemporary 'armed lifeboat' strategy observable on a global scale, particularly orchestrated by the Global North. Employing Günel's critique on political dynamics in the Arabian Peninsula, within this framework, one could contend that the climatic strategies within the 'Persian garden' appear to be 'more often attempts at reframing water-related challenges that

[were] already present, regardless of the effects of climate change' (2016: 292). This underscores the failure of the 'Persian garden' concept in terms of adaptation or, in other words, in terms of the issue of water.

In analyzing the climatic regime out of which the 'Persian garden' concept emerges and by which it is perpetuated, parallels arise with Billy Fleming's critique of the BIG U project for Manhattan (2019) — a construct conceptualized to shield elite communities from climate threats, embodying both a theoretical and a physical barrier. Fleming's analysis exposes a deficiency when addressing contemporary issues, which are more about management, infrastructures, and climate justice. Fleming criticizes the current profession of landscape architecture, characterizing it as an apolitical domain. Expanding on his point, one could posit that beyond the framework of landscape architecture as a practice, its historical trajectory has similarly unfolded in a politically indifferent manner, primarily serving the interests of the economic elite. As Fleming advocates for a shift toward actively embracing climate justice within landscape architecture, a deliberate commitment to climate justice as a transformative force in the field's history would be the crucial remedy as well.

As 'the movement for climate justice builds on anti-imperialist, antiracist, and feminist movements of the past' and suggests ways 'to challenge the notion that city is the antithesis of nature' (Dawson 2017: 9), an examination of the climatic aspects of these gardens should begin by disentangling two intertwined concerns: any imperialist definition that valorizes empires, however old these empires may be, and the antithetical relationship between city and nature. In the case of the 'Persian garden', these two concerns are deeply connected. Alemi's study reveals that, on the one hand, these royal gardens were stages for the manifestation of imperial power (2007). On the other hand, even the later 'Persian gardens' open to the public in Isfahan and Qazvin were situated in a district called *dawlathkhana* (literally, the house of state, a reference to the royal court), deliberately separated from the city (Alemi 1997). Therefore, to critique the climatic dynamics of the 'Persian garden' within the framework of climate justice, addressing these dual dimensions is imperative.

Regarding the relationship between city and nature, it is important to recognize a key distinction in the case of these gardens compared to more contemporary cases. In the 'Persian garden' concept, the manmade natural setting of the garden assumes centrality, while the built city environment and surrounding nature are relegated to peripheries. In other words, the same relationship has embodied in different spatial settings; Williams also acknowledges that 'the country and the city are changing historical realities, both in themselves and in their interrelations' (1975: 189). This problematic relationship in the concept of the 'Persian garden' is exacerbated by the misrepresentation of the Iranian plateau as an expansive 'desert'. This 'desertification'

of the land outside of the royal court and garden has served as an apparatus for exerting power, not only over people but also over land, preparing both for further imperial exploitation in various ways. The climatic regime of the concept of the ‘Persian garden’, fashioned as an idyllic, walled paradise offering comfort and calm to its inhabitants, further reproduces the imperial characteristics of these landscapes. In this regime, areas surrounding the royal garden are perceived merely as resources to be extracted and exploited. The endorsement of the imperial character of these gardens and the reproduction of that character, as I will show, emanates from a blend of colonialist and nationalist ideologies entrenched in 20th-century scholarship that has conceptualized the ‘Persian garden’.

Colonialism and Nationalism in the Concept of ‘Persian Garden’

Connecting the concept of the ‘Persian garden’ to its primary constructors and promoters demonstrates that the ‘Persian garden’, far from being a neutral descriptor, is a colonial construct forged by ‘Western’ scholars and promoted by the Iranian authority’s nationalist agendas. This concept flattens the diverse historical, cultural, and geographical realities of gardens, reinforcing imperial and exclusionary narratives while marginalizing the contributions of ‘others’.

As previously discussed, the term ‘Persian garden’ originates from the work of Pope and Ackerman. In addition to his role as a scholar, Pope also served as a consultant to prominent American collectors, including George Hewitt Myers (1875–1957), founder of the Textile Museum in Washington, DC, and John D. Rockefeller Jr. (1875–1960) (Kadoi 2012). Although Pope consistently admired ‘Persian’ art, his exhibitions, such as *Early Oriental Carpets* (Art Club of Chicago, 1926), reflect his pronounced Orientalist leanings. This, coupled with his role as a consultant, suggests that Pope’s primary endeavor was the portrayal of ‘exotic’ artifacts and entities crafted to captivate ‘Western’ art collectors. In this context, the attribution of the adjective ‘Persian’ to not only gardens but also all artifacts from Iran appears more as a calculated, strategic choice tailored to the art market than as an authentic reflection of reality. This nomenclature brought attention to objects and entities associated with the ‘Orient’. Thus, the term ‘Persian’, when applied to gardens of this genre, emerges more as a colonial construct than a faithful representation of reality. Situating Pope alongside other influential scholars like Wilber in the conceptualization of the ‘Persian garden’ further accentuates the colonial underpinnings of this framing. Wilber, renowned for *Persian Gardens and Garden Pavilions*, published first in 1962 and then in 1979, played a pivotal role in shaping the concept. While serving as a scholar in Iran, Wilber also played a clandestine role as a CIA intelligence operative, leading the infamous 1953 coup in Iran, as documented by the journalist James Risen (2000) through leaked CIA secrets, a series of historical facts

that reveals more direct colonial involvement. The 20th-century conceptualization of the ‘Persian garden’, much like the case of preservation projects in India and James Fergusson’s colonial mission as illuminated by historian Mrinalini Rajagopalan (2017: 3), represents an act of constructing history, whereby the colonizer imposes their own narrative on the history of the ‘Orient’, disregarding how those they consider to be living in the ‘Orient’ perceive their own historical trajectory.

Nevertheless, colonialism within the historical context of Iran, or Persia, constitutes a distinctive and intricate case. Though Iran’s governance, at least since the early 19th century, was subject to manipulation and influence by colonial powers, Iran was never officially colonized (Ghaderi 2018). Furthermore, scholars such as Pope were engaged in Iran at the behest of Iranian authorities, meaning that the Iranian central government was an active participant in these exchanges. The coloniality that appeared in Iran during this time anticipated a Cold War model of influence, in which colonial or imperial powers nominally respected the political autonomy of emerging nations while asserting authority by bestowing benefits like knowledge, financial resources, and military support, all contingent upon sustaining political dependence (Isenstadt 1997).

At the beginning of the 20th century, during the inception of Pope and Ackerman’s discourse, Iran’s predominant political authority was the Pahlavi monarchy, led by Reza Shah (1878–1944). After seizing power through a military coup in 1925, Reza Pahlavi launched a nationalist campaign to transform Iran into a ‘modern’ nation-state, envisioning his monarchy as a revival of ancient ‘Persian’ empires. Along with many Iranian intellectuals of the time, Reza Shah drew inspiration from the portrayal of Iran presented by ‘colonizers’ in crafting his vision of the new nation-state (Asadian 2023). Thus, when Pope and Ackerman, two ‘Western’ writers, coined a new term resonating with nationalist sentiments, it was wholeheartedly embraced. Reza Shah actively supported Pope and Ackerman’s endeavors in Iran, likely serving as the principal patron for their work, including the 1931 *International Exhibition on Persian Art*, as art historian Kishwar Rizvi (2007) notes (**Figure 9**). In this way, nationalism was united with colonialism. Therefore, in Iran, unlike the South Asian cases in which ‘the flipside of colonialism is nationalism’ (Shanon 2014: 361), colonialism works hand in hand with nationalism, steering toward a self-oriental trajectory. The promotion of the concept of the ‘Persian garden’ in this self-orientalizing manner, similar to the case of the ‘Turkish’ house (Akcan 2012), was a nationalist response to cultural colonization, however intertwined with it. Nevertheless, the nationalism prevalent in this context was not devoid of its own intricacies and dilemmas.

Conceptualizing a diverse array of gardens that span an extensive historical timeline and a broad geographical scope, with a national tendency, under the homogenizing label

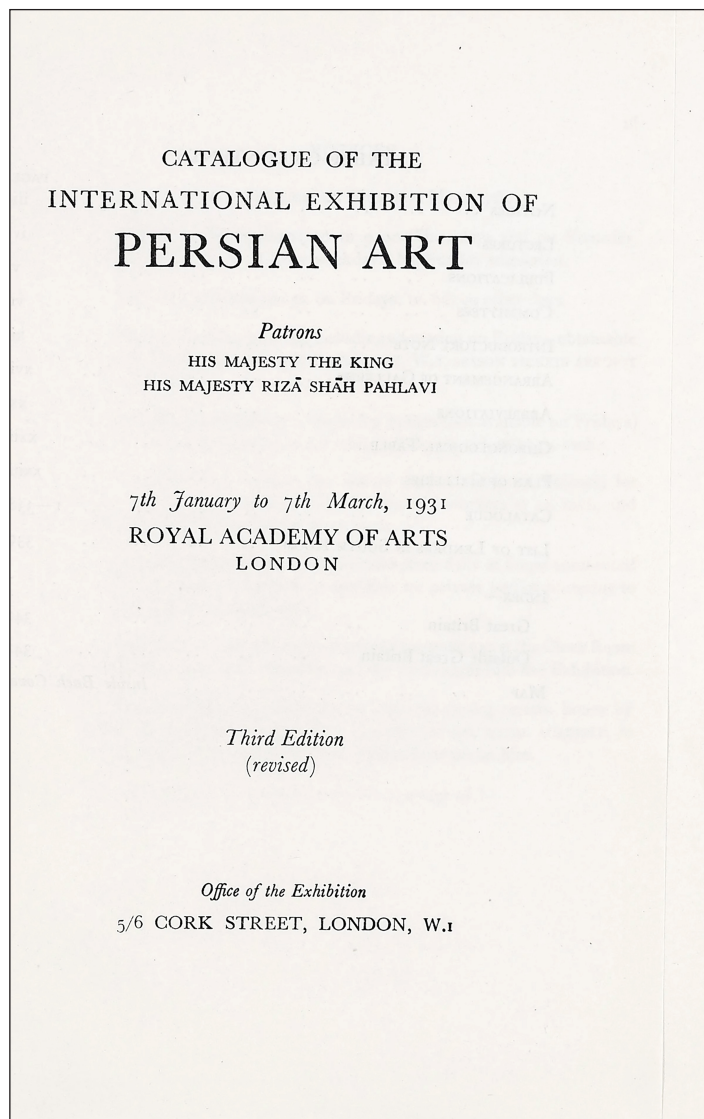


Figure 9: Title page of the exhibition curated by Arthur Upham Pope and held under the patronage of Reza Shah Pahlavi in London (Royal Academy of Arts, 1931). Courtesy of © Royal Academy of Arts, London.

of ‘Persian garden’, not only flattens the rich tapestry of variations inherent in this long *durée* but also, by affiliating these gardens exclusively with a particular race or nation, dismisses the manifold contributions of other agents in this history. Pope and Ackerman themselves admitted that the spatial configuration of these gardens is a product of diverse influences — Islamic, Buddhist, and even Chinese (Pope and Ackerman 1938: 1436). Overlooking these nuanced agents would inevitably lead to the omission of a substantial portion of the history of gardens in the region. These gardens carry the imprints of numerous cultural and political forces that extend beyond the rubric of

‘Persia’. To ascertain a comprehensive conceptual framework, one must move beyond the imperialistic impulse to homogenize an entire geography and its history under a single ideology. Instead, a more discerning approach involves a meticulous exploration of potential defining characteristics that might be shared among all these gardens.

The tendency to reduce a protracted historical continuum, rich in diverse cultures, to a singular term is what necessitates the theoretical and spatial exclusivity of the ‘Persian garden’. However, it is crucial to emphasize that while there is no ‘slum ecology’, to use Mike Davis’s term (2006), surrounding these gardens, the conceptualization of the ‘Persian garden’ as an exclusive enclave for the privileged will result in *producing* such ‘slum ecologies’. This happens through the colonization of land, the excessive extraction of water, and the exploitation of external labor to construct an ostensibly ‘Persian garden’. Thus, concepts like the ‘Persian garden’ not only dismiss parts of the history of gardens but also perpetuate the imperial and colonial facets of history that we must critically examine in our collective pursuit of climate justice.

In naming these gardens, the selected terminology bears the weight of imperial, colonial, and national connotations, which impart a heavy ideological burden. This ideological weight, in turn, has impeded a nuanced scrutiny of this kind of garden, redirecting scholarly efforts instead toward an uncritical adoration of the ‘Persian’ garden as an inviolable archetype. The case of the ‘Persian garden’ shows how creating concepts when writing history can shape an overarching approach to reading the space, potentially steering scholarly discourse in a problematic direction. Further studies on the history of ‘Chinese gardens’, ‘Japanese gardens’, or ‘Italian gardens’ may reveal the same issues, where the process of naming and categorizing can inadvertently perpetuate problematic narratives.

Conclusion

This climatic rereading of ‘Persian garden’ reveals its entrenched ideological foundations, challenging the validity of its conceptualization. The profound role of colonialism and nationalism in shaping this construct illustrates the significant impact of these ideologies on the trajectory of scholarly discourse about the history of gardens in the region. Advocating for a reexamination of the history of gardens in the Iranian plateau, this paper also calls for thorough reevaluations of other similar concepts, such as the ‘Chinese garden’, ‘Japanese garden’, and ‘Italian garden’, for their possible ideological baggage. Historical narratives must be approached with a critical eye by which ideological biases can be stripped away and lead to a deeper understanding of the contexts in which such gardens have evolved.

Notes

- ¹ The English version of the term and the Farsi version of it differ. In Farsi, this kind of garden is called Bagh-e Irani, which could be translated as 'Iranian garden'; however, in English, the use of 'Persian garden' is more common. This difference is due to Iran's political changes at the turn of the 20th century, when Reza Shah, with an approach based on nationalism/racism, came into power. In 1935, insisting on the Aryan as the dominant race living in the country Iran, he changed the name of the country from 'Persia' to 'Iran' and asked all the foreign countries to call this country by the new name (Yarshater 1989). Contradictions of this kind persisted throughout the country's subsequent history. The adjective 'Persian' (in reference to the name 'Persia') in some cases was transformed into 'Iranian' (in reference to the name Iran), in some cases not. To avoid confusion, I consistently use the adjective 'Persian' in this paper.
- ² The central building in these gardens is more accurately referred to as a *kushk*. In Persian, *kushk* denotes a tall building, often positioned at an elevated location with spaces open to its surroundings. Within gardens categorized as 'Persian gardens', the prevailing pattern contains a raised building situated at the intersection of key elements such as water streams and pathways. These buildings not only provided panoramic views of the surrounding landscape but also served as the primary residence. However, due to their resemblance to pavilions and the later influence of European designers, scholars have sometimes referred to them as pavilions. In rare cases, they are even called *kolah farangi* — literally, 'European hat', a reference to their perceived similarity to the top hats introduced to Iran from Europe. I believe *kushk* is a more appropriate term, so when referencing texts that use alternative terms, I consistently use *kushk* in parentheses to maintain clarity and accuracy.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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