A REVIEW ON PERSIAN LITERATURE, MODERN ASPECTS

Saemeh Khorasani
Department of Literature, Tehran Markaz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract- Persian literature is the jewel in the crown of Persian culture. It has profoundly influenced the literatures of Ottoman Turkey, Muslim India and Turkic Central Asia and been a source of inspiration for Goethe, Emerson, Matthew Arnold and Jorge Luis Borges among others. Yet Persian literature has never received the attention it truly deserves. A History of Persian Literature answers this need and offers a new, comprehensive and detailed history of its subject. Persian literature is one of the world's oldest literatures. It spans two-and-a-half millennia, though much of the pre-Islamic material has been lost.

Keywords: Persian literature, Poetry, Islam, Essays,

Introduction
Persian literature sources have been within historical Persia including present-day Iran, Iraq and the Caucasus, as well as regions of Central Asia where the Persian language has historically been the national language. For instance, Molana (Rumi), one of Persia's best-loved poets, born in Balkh or Vakhsh (in what is now Afghanistan or Tajikistan), wrote in Persian, and lived in Konya, then the capital of the Seljuks. The Ghaznavids conquered large territories in Central and South Asia and adopted Persian as their court language. There is thus Persian literature from Iran, Mesopotamia, Azerbaijan, the wider Caucasus, Turkey, western parts of Pakistan, Tajikistan and other parts of Central Asia. Not all this literature is written in Persian, as some consider works written by ethnic Persians in other languages, such as Greek and Arabic, to be included. At the same time, not all literature written in Persian is written by ethnic Persians or Iranians. Particularly, Indic, Caucasian, and Turkic poets and writers have also used the Persian language in the environment of Persianate cultures.

Described as one of the great literatures of mankind,[1] Persian literature has its roots in surviving works of Middle Persian and Old Persian, the latter of which date back as far as 522 BCE (the date of the earliest surviving Achaemenid inscription, the Behistun Inscription). (Persian literature was considered by Goethe one of the four main bodies of world literature.[2]) The bulk of surviving Persian literature, however, comes from the times following the Islamic conquest of Persia circa 650 CE. After the
Abbasids came to power (750 CE), the Persians became the scribes and bureaucrats of the Islamic empire and, increasingly, also its writers and poets. The New Persian literature arose and flourished in Khorasan and Transoxiana because of political reasons – the early Iranian dynasties such as Tahirids and Samanids were based in Khorasan.[3]

Persians wrote in both Persian and Arabic; Persian predominated in later literary circles. Persian poets such as Ferdowsi, Sa'di, Hafiz, Attar, Nezami,[4] Rumi[5] and Omar Khayyam are also known in the West and have influenced the literature of many countries.

**Pre-Islamic Persian literature**

Very few literary works of Achaemenid Persia have survived, due partly to the destruction of the library at Persepolis.[6] Most of what remains consists of the royal inscriptions of Achaemenid kings, particularly Darius I (522–486 BC) and his son Xerxes. Many Zoroastrian writings were destroyed in the Islamic conquest of Persia in the 7th century. The Parsis who fled to India, however, took with them some of the books of the Zoroastrian canon, including some of the Avesta and ancient commentaries (Zend) thereof. Some works of Sassanid geography and travel also survived, albeit in Arabic translations.

No single text devoted to literary criticism has survived from pre-Islamic Persia. However, some essays in Pahlavi, such as "Ayin-e name nebeshtan" (Principles of Writing Book) and "Bab-e edteda’I-ye" (Kalileh o Demneh), have been considered as literary criticism (Zarrinkoub, 1959).[7] Some researchers have quoted the Sho'ubiyye as asserting that the pre-Islamic Persians had books on eloquence, such as 'Karvand'. No trace remains of such books. There are some indications that some among the Persian elite were familiar with Greek rhetoric and literary criticism (Zarrinkoub, 1947).

**Persian literature of the medieval and pre-modern periods**

While initially overshadowed by Arabic during the Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphates, New Persian soon became a literary language again of the Central Asian and West Asian lands. The rebirth of the language in its new form is often accredited to Ferdowsi, Unsuri, Daqiqi, Rudaki, and their generation, as they used pre-Islamic nationalism as a conduit to revive the language and customs of ancient Persia.

In particular, says Ferdowsi himself in his Shahnama:
"For thirty years, I endured much pain and strife, I awaken the Ajam by this Persian [language]."
Poetry
So strong is the Persian aptitude for versifying everyday expressions that one can encounter poetry in almost every classical work, whether from Persian literature, science, or metaphysics. In short, the ability to write in verse form was a pre-requisite for any scholar. For example, almost half of Avicenna's medical writings are in verse. Works of the early era of Persian poetry are characterized by strong court patronage, an extravagance of panegyrics, and what is known as "exalted in style". The tradition of royal patronage began perhaps under the Sassanid era and carried over through the Abbasid and Samanid courts into every major Persian dynasty. The Qasida was perhaps the most famous form of panegyric used, though quatrains such as those in Omar Khayyam's Ruba'iyyat are also widely popular.

Khorasani style, whose followers mostly were associated with Greater Khorasan, is characterized by its supercilious diction, dignified tone, and relatively literate language. The chief representatives of this lyricism are Asjadi, Farrukhi Sistani, Unsuri, and Manuchehri. Panegyric masters such as Rudaki were known for their love of nature, their verse abounding with evocative descriptions.

Through these courts and system of patronage emerged the epic style of poetry, with Ferdowsi's Shahnma at the apex. By glorifying the Iranian historical past in heroic and elevated verses, he and other notables such as Daqiqi and Asadi Tusi presented the "Ajam" with a source of pride and inspiration that has helped preserve a sense of identity for the Iranian peoples over the ages. Ferdowsi set a model to be followed by a host of other poets later on.

The 13th century marks the ascendancy of lyric poetry with the consequent development of the ghazal into a major verse form, as well as the rise of mystical and Sufi poetry. This style is often called Araqi (Iraqi) style, (western provinces of Iran were known as Persian Iraq (Araq-e-Ajam) and is known by its emotional lyric qualities, rich meters, and the relative simplicity of its language. Emotional romantic poetry was not something new however, as works such as Vis o Ramin by As'ad Gorgani, and Yusof o Zoleikha by Am'aq Bokharai exemplify. Poets such as Sana'i and Attar (who ostensibly have inspired Rumi), Khaqani Shirvani, Anvari, and Nizami, were highly respected ghazal writers. However, the elite of this school are Rumi, Sadi, and Hafiz Shirazi.

Regarding the tradition of Persian love poetry during the Safavid era, Persian historian Ehsan Yarshater notes, "As a rule, the beloved is not a woman, but a young man. In the early centuries of Islam, the raids into Central Asia produced many young slaves. Slaves were also bought or received as gifts. They were made to serve as pages at court or in the households of the affluent, or as soldiers and bodyguards. Young men, slaves or not, also, served wine at banquets and receptions, and the more
gifted among them could play music and maintain a cultivated conversation. It was love toward young pages, soldiers, or novices in trades and professions which was the subject of lyrical introductions to panegyrics from the beginning of Persian poetry, and of the ghazal."[8] During the same Safavid era, many subjects of the Persian Safavids were patrons of Persian poetry, such as Teimuraz I of Kakheti.

In the didactic genre one can mention Sanai's Hadiqat-ul-Haqiqah (Garden of Truth) as well as Nizami's Makhzan-ul-Asrār (Treasury of Secrets). Some of Attar's works also belong to this genre as do the major works of Rumi, although some tend to classify these in the lyrical type due to their mystical and emotional qualities. In addition, some tend to group Naser Khosrow's works in this style as well; however true gems of this genre are two books by Sadi, a heavyweight of Persian literature, the Bustan and the Gulistan.

After the 15th century, the Indian style of Persian poetry (sometimes also called Isfahani or Safavi styles) took over. This style has its roots in the Timurid era and produced the likes of Amir Khosrow Dehlavi, and Bhai Nand Lal Goya.

**Essays**

The most significant essays of this era are Nizami Arudhi Samarqandi's "Chahār Maqāīleh" as well as Zahiriddin Nasr Muhammad Aufi's anecdote compendium Jawami ul-Hikayat. Shams al-Mo'ali Abol-hasan Ghaboois ibn Wushmgir's famous work, the Qabus nama (A Mirror for Princes), is a highly esteemed Belles-lettres work of Persian literature. Also highly regarded is Siyasatnama, by Nizam al-Mulk, a famous Persian vizier. Kelileh va Demneh, translated from Indian folk tales, can also be mentioned in this category. It is seen as a collection of adages in Persian literary studies and thus does not convey folkloric notions.

**Biographies, hagiographies, and historical works**

Among the major historical and biographical works in classical Persian, one can mention Abolfazl Beyhaghi's famous Tarikh-i Beyhaqi, Lubab ul-Albab of Zahiriddin Nasr Muhammad Aufi (which has been regarded as a reliable chronological source by many experts), as well as Ata-Malik Juvayni's famous Tarikh-i Jahangushay-i Juvaini (which spans the Mongolid and Ilkhanid era of Iran). Attar's Tazkerat-ol-Owliya ("Biographies of the Saints") is also a detailed account of Sufi mystics, which is referenced by many subsequent authors and considered a significant work in mystical hagiography.

**Literary criticism**

The oldest surviving work of Persian literary criticism after the Islamic conquest of Persia is Muqaddame-ye Shahnname-ye Abu Mansuri, which was written during the Samanid period.[9] The work deals with the myths and legends of Shahnname and is
considered the oldest surviving example of Persian prose. It also shows an attempt by the authors to evaluate literary works critically.

Persian storytelling

One Thousand and One Nights is a medieval folk tale collection which tells the story of Scheherazade, a Sassanid queen who must relate a series of stories to her malevolent husband, King Shahryar, to delay her execution. The stories are told over a period of one thousand and one nights, and every night she ends the story with a suspenseful situation, forcing the King to keep her alive for another day. The individual stories were created over several centuries, by many people from a number of different lands.

The nucleus of the collection is formed by a Pahlavi Sassanid Persian book called Hazār Afsānah[10], a collection of ancient Indian and Persian folk tales.

During the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid in the 8th century, Baghdad had become an important cosmopolitan city. Merchants from Persia, China, India, Africa, and Europe were all found in Baghdad. During this time, many of the stories that were originally folk stories are thought to have been collected orally over many years and later compiled into a single book. The compiler and 9th-century translator into Arabic is reputedly the storyteller Abu Abd-Allah Muhammad el-Gahshigar. The frame story of Shahrzad seems to have been added in the 14th century.

References

2. Von David Levinson; Karen Christensen, Encyclopedia of Modern Asia, Charles Scribner's Sons. 2002 p. 48
4. C. A. (Charles Ambrose) Storey and Franço de Blois (2004), "Persian Literature - A Biobibliographical Survey: Volume V Poetry of the Pre-Mongol Period", RoutledgeCurzon; 2nd revised edition (June 21, 2004). p. 363: "Nizami Ganja`i, whose personal name was Ilyas, is the most celebrated native poet of the Persians after Firdausi. His nisbah designates him as a native of Ganja (Elizavetpol, Kirovabad) in Azerbaijan, then still a country with an Iranian population, and he spent the whole of his life in Transcaucasia; the verse in some of his poetic works which makes him a native of the hinterland of Qom is a spurious interpolation."
5. Franklin Lewis, Rumi Past and Present, East and West, Oneworld Publications, 2000. How is it that a Persian boy born almost eight hundred years ago in Khorasan, the northeastern province of greater Iran, in a region that we identify today as Central Asia, but was considered in those days as part of the Greater Persian cultural sphere,
wound up in Central Anatolia on the receding edge of the Byzantine cultural sphere, in which is now Turkey, some 1500 miles to the west? (p. 9)

6. Encyclopedia of Library and ... - Google Books
10. Abdol Hossein Saeedian, "Land and People of Iran" p. 447