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Conflict of Modernity and Tradition in Twentieth Century Persian Poetry

Jawad Hamedani, Ph.D. and Muhammad Safeer Awan, Ph.D.

Abstract

Twentieth century Persian poetry is marked by the tensions between modernity and traditionalism. The classical school adhered to the traditional modes of expression and thought and remained aloof from contemporary issues and themes. On the contrary, those influenced by western modernity derived their inspiration in terms of techniques and subject matter from the major trends in modernist movement in arts and culture. However, our contention in this paper is that they do not go much beyond the imitation level to provide any panacea for the socio-political problems of their society.

Nima Yushij introduced western literary modernism in Persian poetry which in turn influenced many individual writers as well as a number of indigenous movements but could not bring about any significant change in numerous socio-economic problems confronting that society. In that scenario, Iqbal's poetry remained a powerful social and ideological force that invoked many people to action and brought the message of hope and deliverance from the tyranny of the imperial world order. Iqbal rejects both the Eastern parochialism and western godless worldview. His influence on Persian poetry in this regard has been enormous.

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A Brief Overview of Classical Persian Poetry

The millennium long history of Persian poetry (Safa 1342, vol:1, p 168-175) may be divided into following five phases on the basis of differences in themes, style and form:

1. Khorasani Style (Sabk e Khorasani)
2. Iraqi Style (Sabk e Iraqi)
3. Hindi Style (Sabk e Hindi)
4. Bazgasht era (or the “Echo” period known in Persian as Sabk e Bazgasht)
5. Nima's Style or modernist period

Studied from historicist perspective, Persian poetry of every age seems to be influenced by its socio-political contexts and thus carries certain themes and trends. Qaseeda or laudatory poetry was the hallmark of Sabk-e-Khorasani¹ (Khorasani style) that was characterized by the exaggerated praise of the kings' great deeds, and the use of the terms from astrology and medicine. The poet of this age was concerned with pleasure and intoxication. This era made an artistic attempt to look at the world from the king's perspective. The ghazal of Sabk-e-Iraqi was characterized by colorful images, and was marked by mystical thought; therefore, it was a balanced blend of the mundane and the divine love. The theme of love exists predominantly in the poetry of this age (Shameesa 1375H, p: 194, 209, 258). Sabk-e-Hindi made an expression of philosophy and poetic imagination. Persian poetry of this age adopted a novel meaningfulness and the mystic tradition. It was also influenced by the Indian cultural tradition. (Safa 1378H, p:537-538; Shameesa 1375H p: 275-295). The poetry of Sabk-e-Khorasani and Sabk-e-Iraqi remained confined to the royal courts, whereas the Persian verse of Sabk-e-Hindi started reaching people (Pournamadariyan, 1388, p: 43). After Hindi era, it is widely believed that Persian poetry lost its traditional beauty and charm, especially, it seems to be a mere reflection of the style and voice of the past three periods (Shameesa 1375, p: 307-332). The creative impulse during the Bazgasht era was mostly lost and it looked more like a broken image of the artistic achievements of the past ages as is evident even in its nomenclature that it was a mere echo of the past.

The poetry of pre-Bazgasht era not only has poetic musicality, artistic beauty and delicate images but also preserves the contextual details, philosophical trends and social conditions of its times; this poetry has also contributed towards the shaping of the new theoretical views in contrast to the poetry of Bazgasht era which seems completely cut off from its contemporary concerns. It is a sterile age in terms of innovation and experimentation.

Persian Literature in Modern Iran

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With the dawn of the twentieth century, Iran's socio-political landscape witnessed some visible changes under European influences (Yahaqi 1375H, p:13-19). The arrival of the printing press in Tehran, the establishment of Dar-ul-Fanoon (the first modern centre of knowledge), the opening of other academic centers, political upheavals, and the socio-cultural exchanges between Iran and Europe relations brought about a revolution in Persian poetry. This revolution brought a seismic shift in the traditional artistic foundations, and redefined such basic concepts as the relationship between humans and the universe which in turn led to an exploration of new horizons for the Persian poetics.

This early twentieth century Iranian literary shift is categorized as modern Persian Literary era. Dr Muhammad Is'haq notes that modern Persian poetry is as much contemporary to the birth of modern Iran as it is a precursor of modernity in Iran. Owing to the evolution of the theoretical concepts, the modern Persian poets, with a view to providing moral fabric to their society, not merely explored and adopted new themes but experimented with the forms as well, since novel forms were required to carry express new themes (Is'haq 1379, p:37).

It is interesting that the European Modernist movement in arts that started around 1910 (if one may accept the dramatic pronouncement of Virginia Woolf that "On or around 1910, the world changed forever") lost its appeal by the mid-twentieth century due to various socio-political conditions. Just as in Iran, the turn of the century events brought about many changes, in a similar fashion the two great wars were the main engine of change in the Western cultural realm as well. The Great War proved a death knell for the 19th century Victorian norms and artistic traditions and started Modernist trends in culture, arts and literature.

The European literary Modernism was marked by certain trends: a break from the past, rebellion against all sorts of authority (whether divine or mundane, political or cultural, familial or linguistic). That is why the Modernist writers and artistic were highly experimental in devising new forms of expressions that were in turn derived from other art forms like painting. For example, Cubism and Imagism in poetry were in fact inspired by the experimentations of Picasso. Since it was believed that the old world order that was marked by the principle of cosmic unity and wholeness of things had been replaced with a fragmented, decentered universe, the cultural production of the Post-war era too reflected that fragmentation.

It is intriguing that the Modernist trends in Persian literature coincide with those of the Western modernist revolt. Therefore, the question arises whether Persian Poetry was imitating the European literary norms of the Modernist period or was it imbibing those influences from other, more indigenous sources. For this purpose, it is pertinent to discuss the salient features of the modernist Persian poetry.

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Classicism can be witnessed in the works of those poets whose themes, structures and styles are inspired by the traditional poetry, or those whose themes are modern yet medium of expression and style are old. Modernism is found in the creations of the poets who adopted both modernist themes as well as form and style such as free verse (Is'haq 1379H, P: 41-42). In this modernist movement, naturalism, patriotism (Iranism) and feminism emerged as the new poetic trends. The present study reviews the thematic and formal aspects of modern Persian poetry and compares the works of modern Irani poets with Iqbal's poetry, keeping western Modernist poetic trends in the backdrop.

Classicism

The strong tradition of the Persian poetry of the past nine centuries has its deep impact on the poetry of the twentieth century. Classicism and commitment to tradition have been the salient features in the first half of the twentieth century, with many prominent figures as the torch bearers of classicism.



Parveen Etesami (1907-1941)

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parvin_E'tesami

During this period, Parveen Etesami (1907-1941) was a strong classical voice who hailed the eastern traditions and values and wrote on the themes of humanism, justice and contentment in the classical style.

Parveen is influenced by the classical poetry in terms of themes and structure but is not indifferent to the sufferings and miseries of the modern man. Parveen suffered from severe social and psychological miseries in her short life. In her brief life span she earned everlasting fame by unifying the apparently contrasting aspects of the spiritual and the mundane, the soul and the matter, where the earthly sufferings meet the comfort of the peaceful eternal life. Muhammad Taqi Bahaar opines: "Parveen leads the human soul towards struggle, action, hope, "Ightenam-e-waqt" or temporal consciousness, courage and piety through her wise and knowledgeable poetic statements" (as cited in Sufi 2001, p. 257). In her Mathnavi, laudatory poems, ghazals, and

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other genres Parveen wrote about the transitoriness of the world and the permanence and sublimity of the human soul. Despite the fact that her inner self was shattered, she seemed determined and sounded solid. In her Mathnavi “Lut-e-Haq”, Parveen expresses her views on faith and tasawuf and the mysteries of God very artistically. Parveen’s epitaph written by herself, reads thus:

اینکه خاک سیهش بالین است
اخترِ چرخ ادب پروین است
صاحبِ آن همه گفتار امروز
سائل فاتحه و یاسین است
خاک در دیده بسی جان فرساست
سنگ بر سینه بسی سنگین است
هر که باشی و زهر جا برسی
آخرین منزل هستی این است
ببند این بستر و عبرت گیرد
هر که را چشم حقیقت بین است
آدمی هر چه توانگر باشد
چون بدین نقطه رسد مسکین است
اند ر آنجا که قضا حمله کند
چاره تسلیم و ادب تمکین است
زادن و کشتن و پنهان کردن
دهر را رسم و ره دیرین است
خرم آنکس که درین محنت گاه
خاطری را سبب تسکین است

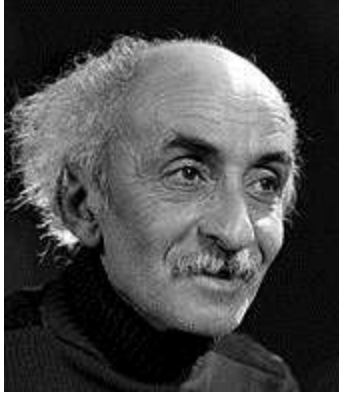
She who is sleeping under this black earth is the bright star of the literary heights;
Though she has found nothing from this world except bitter sorrow, there is
nothing in her poetry except sweetness;
This poet of many volumes is waiting for your blessings;
If there is mud in the eye it's very painful; and stone on one's chest is crushing;
Whoever you are and wherever you have come from, this is your destination too;
When Death strikes, what can we do except to surrender to its might;
Giving birth, killing and then concealing in earth is the old custom of Time;
Praiseworthy is he who becomes a source of happiness in the time of sorrow
(Haakmi 1379H:40).

Despite her individuality, novelty, strength and the maturity of thought, Parveen, in theme, style and structure, seems to be deeply influenced by the old classical tradition. Although her voice and style remains distinct throughout, it lacks rebelliousness of the other contemporary modernist poets. Hence, Parveen will be considered a classicist in Persian poetry.

Other major poets associated with classical era are: Muhammad Bahar Taqi (1887-1951), Farukhi Yazdi (1889-1939), Meerzazadeh Ishqi (1891-1934), and Rahi Mo,eri (1909-1969).

Modernism

With the onset of the twentieth century, an upheaval of sorts was witnessed in the classical Persian poetry. This brought seismic changes in the poetic standards and structures, resulting into a new stream of poetic lava heading for its distinction away from the sublimity of classicism. It might have taken centuries before eruption but as it emerged it took little time to grow up.



Nima Yushij

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nima_Yooshij

The man who founded this modern Persian poetry was Nima Yushij (1896-1960). Old and strong Persian classical tradition which had its deep impact on the poetic tradition of the Subcontinent rejected this shift in the beginning, but then accepted it as modern verse or Nimayi verse. Owing to his knowledge of the French language and literature, Nima Yushij introduced and dressed Persian poetry with modern universal form, structure, style and meaningfulness. Naturally, this rebellion by Nima faced severe reaction to the extent that the authentic mainstream journals of that age banned his poetry from getting published, and ridiculed him (Langrodi 1377H, p:108). But perhaps his voice was of the need of time. This modern poetry was neither a ghazal nor a laudatory poem (qaseeda), quartet (rubai), mathnavi, etc. Modern verse did not follow the formulaic rules and was extremely flexible in devising and accommodating new experiments in forms. Nima based his verse on natural scenes, miseries of rustic life and Iranianism.

Nima states:

“My liberal growth was meant for some collision at every stage of my life. My free verse has its own system and standard of meters and rhyme. The length of my lines is not decided randomly. I believe in order even in this chaos” (Sufi 1380H, P:248).

In 1937, Nima succeeded in introducing a new form of Persian poetry. Some of his lines are given below, for example:

داروگ

خشک آمد کشتگاه من

در جوار کشت بمسایه

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گرچه می گویند "می گریند روی ساحل نزدیک

سوگواران در میان سوگواران"

قاصد روزان ابری، داروگ! کی می رسد باران

بربساطی که بساطی نیست

در درون کومه ای تاریک من که ذره ای بآن نشاطی نیست

وجدار دنده های نی به دیوار اتاقم دارد خشکیش می ترکد

چون دل یاران که در بجران یاران،

قاصد روزان ابری داروگ کی می رسد باران

My fields are as drought-stricken as that of my neighbor; the mourners are mourning among the grief-stricken;

O the harbinger of rainy seasons, Darwag,³ when will it rain into my dark world where there is no delight;

Dryness is breaking the logs of my hut just as in separation of friends, hearts break down;

O Darwag, the harbinger of rainy seasons, when will it rain (Hakmi 1379H:248).

The original contribution of Nema Yushej was giving Persian poetry a new form and new modes of expression. As for implications of his verse, he was attached with ground realities away from metaphysics, perhaps under the influence of the modern western poets. He does not believe in any tasawuf, therefore his voice is an elegy of the miseries of the modern times but it finds no consolation. His way of expression gave a new ray of hope to several other Persian poets, who followed Nimai style and wrote many lines, and the process continues. Some of these poets are: Ahmad Shamlo (1304-1379H), Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980), Furogh Farukhzad (1934-1966), Shafi'ey Kadkani (1939). It must be noted that these poets took the advantage of the Nemaï form and style, and not his views about the universe and existence. Nemaï form itself brought a thematic diversity in Persian poetry.

Feminism

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Furogh Farrukhzad

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forough_Farrokhzad

After the Nima's intervention in Persian poetic style and thematic concerns, various issues peculiar to modernist sensibility were expressed through it. Women's emotions and women's viewpoint about the universe is very prominent in Furogh Farrukhzad's poetry. The representative of feminism in Persian poetry, Furogh, wrote two varying types of verse during her short life. She followed Nima in form but brought novelty and individuality in themes and subject. In the early part of her age, Furogh expresses a young girl's romantic emotions and feelings and sounds rebellious to religion and faith. She owned unlimited abilities and bravery and was a strong voice for Irani women.

The feminine rebellion suppressed throughout history by patriarchy, was voiced strongly by Furogh. There is also another contrasting dimension of Furogh's poetry which seems to be the reaction of the former. During this time, she returned to God as the poetry of this new phase of her life is full of the themes of repentance, confessions, and love of the Divine. The first phase of her poetry, characterized by individuality, novelty, rebellion, and feminine emotions, is regarded as brilliant work in the world of poetry:

من خواب دیده ام که کسی می آید

من خواب یک ستاره قرمز دیده ام

و پلک چشمم می پرد

کفشهایم می جفت می شود

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و کور شوم اگر دروغ بگویم
من پله های پشت بام را جارو کردم
و شیشه و پنجره را شستم

This brief poem is a reflection of the feelings of a young girl. How restlessly an eastern woman waits for those fateful moments as expressed in the poem, and if somehow her dreams come true, what lies for her in store is always uncertain. Furogh expresses all these concerns between the lines in the above given poem.

Furogh learnt French, German, and Italian languages and through them was introduced to the western literature (Sufi 1380H, P:414). Furogh was contributing in the film industry of Iran, when she lost her life in an accident.

تنها تو ماندی ای زن ایرانی
در بندِ ظلم و نکبت و بد بختی
خواهی اگر که پاره شود این بند
دستی بزن به دامن سر سخن
تسلیم حرف زور مشو برگز
با وعده های خوش منیشن از پا
سیلی بشو ، نفرت و خشم و درد
سنگ گراں ظلم بکن از جا

Only you are left now O Iranian Woman
Caught in the endless cycle of cruelty and misfortune;
If you wish to free yourself, never bow to injustice;
On the promise of good days never be contented and silent;

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Be like a flood and sweep away the stones of hatred and atrocity (Furogh Farrukhzad 1334)

Iqbal's Influence on Modern Persian Poetry



Allama Mohammad Iqbal

Courtesy: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Iqbal

Whenever we discuss Persian poetry, especially of the twentieth century, the question regarding Iqbal's (1876-1939) status and contribution arises. The twentieth century Persian poetry in Iran can be viewed as a journey from traditionalism towards modernism. But as stated above, even in this age the traditional and classical poetry existed side by side. In the meanwhile, a very distinct voice of Persian poetry emerged, not in Iran but in the Subcontinent. Persian literature of the Subcontinent kept registering its own distinct identity, characterized by the local color, from Ghaznavid Period till the time of Iqbal. Sabk-e-Hindi, which has been discussed briefly above, was finally framed as a separate acknowledged style despite the criticism of some Iranian critics.

With the rise of British Empire and decline of the Mughal Empire in the Subcontinent, Persian poetry, alongside Persian language, also started breathing its last here. If we skim through the fifth and sixth volumes of Dr. Zahoor uddin Ahmad's book "*Pakistan main Farsi Adab*" (Persian literature in Pakistan), we may find a long list of names who wrote Persian literature (Ahmad 2005), but there is hardly any name which could be called as the representative of that great poetic tradition adopted by Bedil and Ghalib. The only poetic voice that revived Persian poetry in India during the first half of the twentieth century is that of Iqbal who with his innovative style as well as ideological stance put new spirit into that dying genre.

It is intriguing that Iqbal wrote Persian poetry in a manner which does not seem estranged to Iranians. Today the Iranian students in literature are closer to Iqbal than Bedil and Ghalib. Iqbal, through the simplicity of language, innovative words, and musical rhythm, not only gave a universal and optimistic message that awakened the Persian verse to the contemporary problems Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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but also offered solutions to them. Iqbal's lexical innovations in Persian are anti-traditional and fresh but still they add to the musicality of the Persian verse, and are quite meaningful. The twentieth century literature is divided into two contrasting streams of rebellion against tradition on the one hand and tradition-worship on the other. Iqbal cannot be included in either in traditional or in anti-traditional camp. He created his own way. He is neither a blind follower of the eastern tradition nor adopts the western modernity without questioning it first. Iqbal's ideal of man is neither impotent nor omnipotent. His ideal man is a believer and worshipper having the qualities of his Lord. (Iqbal P:397)

Iqbal goes beyond the geographical boundaries of Afghanistan and Iran and addresses the human soul, and not any one nation or ethnic group. Muhammad Baqai Maakan writes: "such scholars as Iqbal, Rumi and Attar transcend the confines of temporal and spatial limitations." (Baqai Makaan 2006:118). Iqbal's man is neither a superman nor a subhuman species; he does not only surrender to the Divine will, he is also a creator in the image of his Creator.

از گناه بنده صاحب جنون
کا یَناتِ تازه ای آید برون

From an adventurous and challenging man's madness is born a new cosmos.
(Iqbal 1343:339)

The desire to seek a new world has made his poetry free from the aimlessness and restlessness of contemporary world:

سوز و گذارِ زندگی لذتِ جستجوی تو
راه چو مار می گزد گر نروم بسوی تو
سینه گشاده جبرئیل از بر عاشقان گذشت
تا شرری باو فتد ز آتش آرزوی تو
هم بهوای جلوه ای پاره کنم حجاب را
هم به نگاه نارسا پرده کشم به روی تو
من به تلاش تو روم یا بتلاش خود روم

All warmth in life is due to the delight of your search; the path that does not lead to you is like a biting snake;

Gabriel with open heart goes to the lovers' company to find some warmth from their burning desires;

When I raise a curtain to see you, something hides you with another blinding curtain;

Whether I should seek you or seek lost myself, I have lost my sight and my will in your search (Iqbal 1343:123)

In this sense, Iqbal is a traditionalist since, unlike the modernist/western over-emphasis on individualism, he appeals to a more Universalist sensibility. It is interesting that Nema is a contemporary of Iqbal and both of them have experimented with poetic forms, structures, and meanings. The following characteristics are commonly found in the poetry of this era:

- 1) Objectivity
- 2) Use of common/everyday diction
- 3) Liberalism
- 4) Patriotism/nationalism
- 5) Impact of modern disciplines (Ya Haqi 1375H, P:18-21)

It is true that, by violating the traditional modes of Persian poetry, Nima broadened the scope of poetic expression but, unlike Iqbal, could never become the poet of hope and life. His work gives beautiful images of nature but he is in search of freedom from the cruelty of nature and is not hopeful. His poem "Darwag", quoted in the beginning of the present paper, is an instance of the same hopelessness. Furogh's poetry has the modern trends which are influenced by Nimai style but distinct in meaningfulness. This trend was that of feminism and appeared in Furogh's poetry first of all. Furogh emerged as a representative of the feminine cause but, in her own words, this intellectual activism resulted into personal failures and disruptions in her matrimonial life. Furogh admits that because of the taboo topics and element of nudity in her poetry led to her social ostracization. (Yahaqi 1375H, P:131). In this way, she represented the feelings and emotions of women but it led to her psychological breakdown. Therefore, critics of her poetry mounted the question whether, by following western civilization and launching any western movement in the context of the east, cultural hybridity of this sort leads to personal and social failure of the artist?

Studying these trends reveals that during this transition period, the twentieth century Persian poetry seems to be at cross-roads of traditionalism and modernism and is an account of the Language in India www.languageinindia.com

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collision and collusion of various trends. This way Persian poetry adopted a new way of expression that helped various theoretical movements to flourish. Traditionalist poets remained attached to the old world of metaphysical subtleties and ignored ground realities, and consider verse for pleasure and art. On the contrary, the modernist Persian poetry deals with more mundane issues. However, instead of giving any roadmap in solving the issues, they are given to despondency, coupled with identity crisis and it largely remains uncured. In these circumstances, Iqbal gives a message of hope, dignity of mankind, freedom and viceregency of God. He is neither a fan of the East nor a worshipper of the West. He desires a paradigm shift in thoughts but simultaneously works out a plan of rehabilitation.

Some of the Iranian critics objected to Iqbal's language while others liked it. Iqbal's Urdu has also been criticized by many (Ayub Sabir 2003, P:30-50). It is not only a matter of poetic license but formalist creativity that Iqbal employs such terms that seem to violate the established poetic norms and diction. In this way, Iqbal liberated Persian poetry from the classical bonds in terms of poetic structures. It does not mean that he has completely divorced himself from the classical tradition. In his Persian poetry, Iqbal has used the forms of classical poets but thematically his poetry belongs to the twentieth century socio-political milieu. Iqbal's contemporary Persian poets traced their identity either in Iranianness or linguistic differences. However, he traced human identity in its divine origins. Iqbal hailed Bedil's poetry because he, just like Iqbal himself, teaches humans to trust in themselves before they trust in the Divine (Iqbal 2003, P:9).

Notes

1. Sabk or sabak means style or school of a particular style. In the history of Persian literature Muhammad Taqi Bahar first of all used the term for Sabk shenasi for stylistics. For more on this please see Bahar's book *Sabk Shenasi e Nasr*, and Siroos Shameesa's *Sabk Shenasi Nazm*.
2. On the history and evolution of Persian poetry please see A.G. Browne's *A Literary History of Persia*; and *Sher ul Ajam* by Shibli Numani.
3. Darwag is a frog-like animal that is considered as a precursor of the rainy season.

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