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### Writing Persian Literary History: a Critical Perspective

Generally literary history writing equals a canonization of a body of texts. The first Western canonization of a body of Persian literary texts is Edward G. Browne's *A Literary History of Persia* concluded in 1924 (Browne 1902-24). This literary history is of course the magnificent work of Browne himself, but it is also shaped by Browne's Persian informants and their understanding of the Persian literary past – in the wake of the 20th century and its atmosphere of growing Iranian nationalism. This aspect of the genesis of Persian literary history is a central theme in Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi's very interesting book, *Refashioning Iran. Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (2001), which, among other things, demonstrates the significance of Iranian scholars' contribution to the making of Western studies in Persian literature.

The role of Persian scholars and authors in Iranian studies written by Westerners is of some importance. First of all the Persian scholars and authors can function as a kind of filter through which for instance a body of texts is canonized as *the* corpus that makes up a literary history, including some texts, excluding others. Secondly the scholars' interpretation of the texts and the authors' self-image might be re-produced by the (un-critical) literary historian, in which case also the contents, themes, motives, etc. of the body of texts are canonized.

In the following I will give a brief sketch of some of the Persian literary histories written in the 20th century. I confine myself to the history of prose literature and to the history of the literature written in the period from around 1920 until the 1970s. I have singled out three genuine literature histories, namely: 1) Jan Rypka's *History of Iranian Literature* – first published in 1956 in Prague, enlarged and translated into German in 1959, and into English in 1968 (the edition from which I quote) – in which Věra Kubíčková (1968) has written about the Persian literature of the 20th century, that is, until around 1960; 2) Hassan Kamshad's *Modern Persian Prose Literature* (1966), covering the period up to the mid-fifties; and 3) Michael Hillmann's 'Persian Prose Fiction (1921-77): An Iranian Mirror and Conscience', in Ehsân Yarshater's *Persian Literature* (1988), which stops its treatment of modern Persian prose literature just before the Iranian-Islamic revolution in 1978-79. I have also in-

cluded the introduction to *Stories from Iran. A Chicago Anthology 1921-1991* edited by Heshmat Moayyad (1992), who has also written the introduction, 'The Persian Short Story: An Overview'. This is, strictly speaking, not a piece of literary history, but close enough and I need it to make a point.

The above-mentioned histories of literature are written in different time-periods and therefore do not treat the same periods in the Persian literary history. Nevertheless there is overlapping subject matter, which is why I venture to make some comparisons with regard to the presented literature. Furthermore, my main intention here is to compare the light in which the literature is presented, differently from one literary history to another. This has to do with varying assessments of the body of literature, the canon, which, by the way, is almost the same in all the literary histories mentioned, except for the fact that the most recent ones, Hillmann and Moayyad, include the prose literature of the sixties and the seventies. And ultimately, that is my contention, the different treatments of the literary canon has to do with a difference in literary taste.

Věra Kubičková deals mostly with the literary period going from 1921 to 1941, *i.e.* the Reżâ Šâh period of modernization and Westernization. Her approach to the literature produced in this period is sociological and political with a tinge of the Marxist ideology that ruled in Eastern Europe at that time. Kubičková (1968: 379) opens her discussion of modern prose after Reżâ Šâh's *coup* by defining two main trends in Persian literature in general, those of the «conservatives (*kuhna-parastân*) and the modernists (*mutajaddidûn, in-qilâbiyyûn*)». Concerning prose literature, the modernist literature is connected with the quest to enlighten and inform the masses of the realities of an (from the West) emerging new cultural and social world order in clear, plain prose: «[i]t was the modernists who came forward in defence of prose as a literary genre. They boldly proclaimed that it was of greater merit to write good straightforward, non-bombastic prose than a few lines of rhyming verse...» (*ibid.*: 380). While the conservatives seem to be connected with the Classical Persian prose (and poetry) and nationalistic, romantic, historical works. Sometimes, though, the two trends blend in the works of the individual authors.

The larger part of the works from the Reżâ Šâh period discussed by Kubičková is novels. These novels group into two categories, one of historical novels with a nationalist, romantic content, and one of novels the subject of which is the decline of moral in a changing society, often with women, compulsory marriage and prostitution as main focuses. Although both groups in general are described as lacking the techniques of the modern Western novel some of the novelists are characterized as at least good prose writers, for instance Badi', Raḥimzâde Şafavi, Ḥeydar 'Ali Kamâli, Zeyno'l-Âbedin Mo'taman and Ḥejâzi (*ibid.*: 391-95, 409-10).

The overwhelming presence of novelists makes little room for the short story writers of that period (they are not introduced until later except for Jamâlzâde). Jamâlzâde and Hedâyat, which we normally consider the founders

of modern Persian prose literature, are of course mentioned and their importance highlighted, but compared to the novelists, less attention is paid to the short stories of these two authors. Jamâlzâde's groundbreaking first collection of short stories *Yeki bud-o yeki nabud* («Once upon a time») is presented in twenty lines (*ibid.*: 389-90), and Hedâyat is treated in about two pages, mostly biographical information and less on his works (*ibid.*: 410-12).

Hedâyat and 'Alavi, together with a handful of other writers, are discussed in the final section (section 3) of Kubičková's presentation, 'The Chief Representatives of the Short Story' (*ibid.*: 410-16), comprising the period from 1930 to around 1960. This is a bit odd, since both Hedâyat and 'Alavi began writing in the thirties. But maybe it is because Hedâyat's and 'Alavi's short stories more naturally group with the later short story writers' works. The period's more dominant literature is, apparently, the historical novels and short stories and novels with 'social themes' (*ibid.*: 406-8, 408-10, sections 1 and 2). The concluding section mentioned above – about the short story writers – is a discussion of authors whom we could call socio-realist and naturalistic writers, Hedâyat, 'Alavi, Ćubak, Dašti and Âl-e Aĥmad. The last mentioned author Kubičková does not seem to know well, since she proposes that his first collection of short stories is *Az ranji ke mibarim* («About our sufferings», 1947), while it is, in fact, *Did-o bâzdid* («The exchange of visits», 1945). And she calls *Az ranji ke mibarim* «touching» (*ibid.*: 416), although most critics, and reportedly also Âl-e Aĥmad himself (Hillmann 1990: 122), believed the collection to be a failure, labelling it less a piece of literature and more a collection of political propaganda texts.

The overall impression one gets after having read Kubičková's literary history of the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties is that the most important genre for the development of modern Persian prose literature is the novel. The short story, and especially the short stories of Jamâlzâde, Hedâyat and 'Alavi, is *the* artistically most developed and successful genre but eclipsed by the novel in importance and popularity.

Hassan Kamshad's *Modern Persian Prose Literature* was published in 1966 in Cambridge and it covers the period until the 1960s. The period of our interest, 1920 and onwards, is in Kamshad's work divided into three larger sections: 1) The Režâ Šâh period; 2) the post-war period, *i.e.* after the Second World War; and 3) Sâdeq Hedâyat!

The Režâ Šâh period section – which mentions roughly the same authors as Kubičková does – is divided into two periods: the early period (Kamshad 1966: 58-62) with novelists such as Mošfeq Kâzemi, 'Abbâs Xalili and Rabi' Anšâri and the later period (*ibid.*: 63-84) mentioning novelists and short story writers such as Jahângir Jalili, Moĥammad Mas'ud (Dehâti), 'Ali Dašti and Moĥammad Ĥejâzi. Kamshad's approach is mostly aesthetic comparing the Persian prose fiction to its Western genre models, in this period the novel. Kamshad seems to have read most, if not all, of the works of the period. Thus his discussion of the Persian historical, nationalist and moralistic novels is ex-

traordinarily thorough, and, it must be added, somewhat judgemental. Most of the novels of the period is characterized as lacking the basic techniques of the Western novel, and the 1920s are considered a period of literary decline, due to the political circumstances (*ibid.*: 63). Novelists of the later period are more favourably evaluated, and Kamshad calls Mas'ud's (Dehâti's) *Golhâ'i ke dar jahanam miruyad* («The flowers that grow in hell», 1942) «a fine work of art» (*ibid.*: 68), and Hejâzi's *Zibâ* (1931) is spoken of as being «among the best products of modern Persian literature» (*ibid.*: 75).

The next period, the post-war period, is divided into three chapters (*ibid.*: 90-136) which deal with what we could call the by now canonized modern prose writers from both pre- and post-war Iran, Moḥammad 'Ali Jamâlzâde, Bozorg 'Alavi, Jalâl Âl-e Aḥmad, Şâdeq Çubak, Behâzin, Taqî Modârresi and 'Ali Moḥammad Afġâni. They are described as skilled literary craftsmen capable of matching the Western role models, politically engaged and having individual styles. Jamâlzâde is complimented for his first short stories, *Yeki bud-o yeki nabud* (1922), whereas his later writings are criticized for prolixity and lacking a firm and continuous narrative (*ibid.*: 100-1).

Part two of Kamshad's *Modern Persian Prose Literature*, which takes up half the pages of the book, is entitled 'The Leading Writer of Modern Iran, Sâdeq Hedâyat'. As the title indicates, there is no doubt in Kamshad's mind, that Hedâyat is the essence of «Iran's literary genius» (*ibid.*: 201). There are however some negative criticism of Hedâyat's work,<sup>1</sup> but generally Kamshad considers Hedâyat to be the founder of modern Persian prose literature.

In Kamshad's work Hedâyat, Jamâlzâde, 'Alavi and the younger post-war generation of authors get the main attention, and it is clear that their works make up the main part of the canon of modern Persian prose literature. The novelists of the pre-war period are, however, not excluded from the canon. As mentioned, works of Hejâzi and Mas'ud are parts of the literary canon, and some of the other novelists of that period could also be included, if only partly.

The title of Michael Hillmann's chapter on modern Persian prose fiction in Yarshater's *Persian Literature* is, I think, revealing: 'Persian Prose Fiction (1921-77): An Iranian Mirror and Conscience' (Hillmann 1988). While 'Mirror' just tells us that the Persian literature reflects cultural, political, etc. traits of Iranian life in the 20th century, 'Conscience' points to the fact, I think, that Hillmann considers political and social conscience to be an essential element in modern Persian prose literature, at least in the later part of the century and in the authors' own understanding. About the period from 1953 to 1977 Hillmann says «that Persian fiction ... was a primary arena or medium for the display of Persian literary genius and for the representation of the *Iranian intellectual self-image*, individual and collective aspirations, and *social criticism*»

<sup>1</sup> See for instance the headline of the chapter about *Buf-e Kur* 'Hysterical self-analysis' (Kamshad 1966: 165).

(*ibid.*: 291-92; emphasis by the author [C.V.P.]). And another quote: «Modern Persian fiction from its very beginning has been *engagé*, social commitment in fiction becoming a conscious *ta'ahhod-e adabi* (literary commitment) for writers during the 1960s» (*ibid.*: 310).

Hillmann presents the same authors as does Kamshad as the most important prose writers. To those he adds the ones writing in the late sixties and the seventies, for instance Gôlâm-Hosseyn Sâ'edi, Bahrâm Şâdeqi, Simin Dâneşvar, Maḥmud Dowlatâbâdi and Huşang Golşiri. Almost all of them writing in the tradition of Hedâyat, 'Alavi, Ćubak and Âl-e Aḥmad. Only one page is devoted to the, in Hillmann's words «... attempts at historical novels, journalistic social protest fiction, and sentimental social commentary in fiction...» (*ibid.*: 295) of the Reżâ Şâh period. And in addition to that, in the sub-chapter 'Critical Retrospect' (*ibid.*: 310-17), in which the endurance of the period's literary works is assessed, there is no mention of any of the authors of the Reżâ Şâh period, except for Jamâlzâde, Hedâyat and 'Alavi.

According to Michael Hillmann's literary history, the novelists of the pre-war period seems to be excluded from the literary canon. And one could also argue that as an Iranian author in order to be sure of a place in the canon, one must subscribe to *ta'ahhod-e adabi*.

In the introduction to the collection of translated Persian short stories, *Stories from Iran*, Heshmat Moayyad comments several times on political commitment in Persian fiction in a rather critical way. He writes:

Iranian writers, especially after 1953, may be divided into two distinctive groups ... the committed, anti-establishment writers led by Al-e Ahmad, who fought the regime; and those for whom the overthrow of the monarchy did not constitute the exclusive purpose and motivation for writing. Several novelists belonging to the first camp, made politics and political issues the substance of their stories. With them the meaning of their craft became identical with their political stance, a trend that can hardly be rated positively. Among the second group we find some of the best novelists and poets, who are more flexible in the choice of their subjects (Moayyad 1992: 25).

Nevertheless, the anthology is filled with more or less politically committed short story writers, and none of the admittedly few pre-war short story writers are included. Hejâzi or Daşti could have been included in Moayyad's anthology.

Comparing the older histories of literature with the more recent ones, it immediately becomes obvious that a host of authors, to which the older histories of literature attach (great) importance, have now been excluded from the literary canon. I am thinking here of the pre-Second World War novelists, of course. It seems as if the historians of literature, the critics and the self-image of the post-war political writers representing modern social realism and naturalism have succeeded in obliterating the memory of the nationalist, sentimental and romantic novels of the Reżâ Şâh period. It is, I think, neither fair nor scientifically justifiable that a preference for a certain literary movement ex-

cludes other movements from a literary canon. The early Persian novels must be included, in their own right and in their special socio-historical context, in a proper Persian literary history. Although we all can agree that the novel of the Reżâ Šâh period was not fully technically developed, I am sure that the early Persian novels have something interesting to tell us. That is of course only a qualified guess, but still: only recently I discovered that the first piece of Persian Utopian science fiction literature is written by San'atizâde Kermâni in 1924 (*Majma' -e divânegân*, «An assembly of lunatics»), and not by Hedâyat in the early thirties (the short story 'SGLL' from *Sâye-rowšan*, «Twilight», Tehrân 1933) as I thought earlier. The contents of San'atizâde's Utopia must surely be of interest to us, with regard to the field of genre studies as well as the field of the history of ideas.

Another danger of a one-sided approach (the one I see in Hillmann and partly in Kamshad) is that all the literary works risk being tailored to the same pattern. Let me give an example. In a substantial part of the novels and short stories of Âl-e Aḥmad, a main theme is 'identity'. When I refer to 'identity' I think of the presentation in Âl-e Aḥmad's works of Iranian individuals caught between a modern, intellectual (partly non-religious) mindset and the traditional, religious world in which the individuals are born (Pedersen 2002: 128-57). In recent histories of literature this theme in Âl-e Aḥmad's works is downplayed, because of his acknowledged position as the politically committed leader of anti-regime and anti-Western intellectual movement.

Lastly I would like to draw attention to the fact that the early Persian novels were well received and read by many Iranians (both Kubíčková, Kamshad, and Hillmann mention that), while Hillmann (1990: 312) notes that: «As for the influence of Persian fiction [which I interpret to be largely the political committed fiction; C.V.P.] upon Iranian society at large, despite its popularity among some university students and non-establishment literati in Iran, it remains, in a word, negligible». By quoting this I do not mean to say that we should stoop down to populism, but popular success of books *is* an indication of their social and cultural importance, and yet another argument for why they should be included in literary histories of Persian literature.

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