

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

September 8, 2016

*The Temporal Iranian Prologue to Modern(ist) Persian Literature –
A Review of [Persian] Literature of the Early Twentieth Century:
From the Constitutional Period to Reza Shah*

Ali-Asghar Seyed-Ghorab, ed., *Literature of the Early Twentieth Century: From the Constitutional Period to Reza Shah, A History of Persian Literature XI*, I.B. Tauris, 2015, xxii + 519 pp., \$110.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9781845119126.

The opening chapter of *[Persian] Literature of the Early Twentieth Century*, called “The Political and Social Background of the Literature of the Period (1900-1940)” and authored by volume’s editor Ali-Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, presents (in 29 pages) a concise and coherent narrative of a formative and turbulent era, emphasizing the historical backdrop to Persian literary activity, including the Tobacco Concession in 1890 and the successful boycott of it in 1892, the assassination of Naseroddin Shah Qajar in 1896, the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11), the discovery of Iranian oil in 1908, Anglo-Iranian British and Russian interference in Iranian affairs, Iran during the First World War, Reza Khan’s coup d’état in 1921 and ascension to the throne in 1925 as the founder of a new Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah’s autocratic reforms in the 1930s and his banishment from Iran in 1941, and the Twelver Shi’ite clergy’s role in political events during the 1900-1940 period. At the chapter’s end Seyed-Goghrab states: “The period between 1900 and 1940 is certainly one of the most eventful eras in Persian history. The role of poetry..., a national icon of Persian identity..., and literature in general, was crucial, not only to communicate new ideas to the masses, but also to cement a new identity in a time of crisis and political change” (29).

To appreciate early twentieth century Iranian identity, readers might also benefit from more familiarity with demographic and sociological facts of life in Iran at the beginning of this era so as to provide them with a better sense of the audience of Persian poetry then. Arvand Abrahamian provides this succinct description in his standard *A History of Modern Iran*:

At the beginning of the [twentieth] century, the total population [of Iran] was fewer than 12 million—60 percent villagers, 25-30 percent nomads, and less than 15 percent urban residents. Tehran was a medium-sized town of 200,000. Life expectancy at birth was probably less than thirty years, and infant mortality as high as 500 per 1,000 births.... At the start of the century,

the literacy rate was around 5 percent—confined to graduates of seminaries, Koranic schools, and missionary establishments. Less than 50 percent of the population understood Persian—others spoke Kurdish, Arabic, Gilaki, Mazanderani, Baluchi, Luri, and Turkic dialects such as Azeri, Turkman, and Qashqa’i. Public entertainment came in the form of athletic shows in local *zurkhanehs* (gymnasiums); *Shahnameh* recitations in tea- and coffee-houses; royal pageants in the streets; occasional executions in public squares; and, most important of all, flagellation processions, passion plays, and bonfire celebrations during the high Shi’i holy month of Muharram.... In the early twentieth century...paved roads and railways totaled fewer than 340 kilometers. According to one foreign diplomat, mules and camels were the normal means of transport since there were almost “no wheeled vehicles.” The shah was the proud owner of the only motorcar in all of Iran. Under favorable conditions, travelers needed at least 17 days to cross the 350 miles from Tehran to Tabriz, 14 days, the 558 miles to Mashed, and 37 days, the 700 miles to Bushire. Gas lights, electricity, and telephones were luxuries restricted to a few in Tehran. One English visitor wrote nostalgically: “There are no cities in Persia, and likewise no slums; no steam driven industries, and therefore none of the mechanical tyranny that deadens the brain, starves the heart, wearies bodies and mind with its monotony. There are no gas and no electricity...” At the beginning of the period, the perennial dangers haunting the average person were highway robbers and tribal bandits; wild animals...; famine, pestilence, and disease, especially malaria, diphtheria, dysentery, tuberculosis, smallpox, cholera, syphilis, and influenza. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the state, if it could be called that, consisted merely of the shah and his small personal entourage—his ministers, his family, and his patrimonial household. He ruled the country not through a bureaucracy and standing army—both of which were sorely lacking—but through local notables such as tribal chiefs, landlords, senior clerics, and wealthy merchants. In the late nineteenth century, Nasser al-Din Shah reigned as *Shah-in-shah* (King of Kings), *Padshah* (Guardian Shah), *Khaqan* (Khan of Khans), and *Zillallah* (Shadow of God). Courtiers hailed him Justice Dispenser, Supreme Arbiter, Commander of the Faithful, Guardian of the Flock, and Pivot of the Universe. The state was merely an extension of his royal person; the royal person...was sovereign.... At the start of the century, the key words in the political lexicon had been *estabdad* (autocracy), *saltanat* (kingdom), *ashraf* (noble), *a’yan* (notable), *arbab* (landlord), *ri’yat* (subject), and *tireh* (clan).¹

For a visual representation of what Iran was like at the beginning of the twentieth century, the photographs of Antoin Sevruguin (1830-1933) perhaps tell as fair a story as does a historian’s summary or *engagé* Iranian writers’ fictions.²

¹ Arvand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1-5.

² Antoin Sevruguin, *Sevruguin and the Persian Image: Photographs of Iran, 1870-1930*, edited by Frederick Nathaniel (Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery–Smithsonian Institution and University of Washington Press, 1999). Online, readers can Google “images for Antoin Sevruguin’s photographs,” click on specific images and “visit page” for more information.

According to Seyed-Ghorab in his Preface, “This book begins with a general introduction, in Chapter One...[and] contains eight further chapters, each elaborating on one important aspect of the poetry of the period” (xix). But, as the following list of chapters, 2 through 9, encompassing 441 pages shows, attests, five chapters do not deal with poetry: Chapter 2: Poetry as Awakening: Singing Modernity (102 pages), Chapter 3: Modern Persian Prose and Fiction between 1900 and 1940 (28 pages), Chapter 4: Satire in Persian Literature, 1900-1940 (79 pages), Chapter 5: Women Poets (72 pages), Chapter 6: Translations of European Poetry and Their Reception (42 pages), Chapter 7: A History of Iranian Drama, 1850-1941 (58 pages), Chapter 8: Early Twentieth Century Journals in Iran: Response to Modernity in Literary Reviews (37 pages), and Chapter 9: The History of Children’s Literature, 1900-1940 (23 pages). For that matter, several chapters also treat the 1941-1979 period, for example, the section called “Committed and Radical Journals” in Chapter 8 (444).

For the English-reading audience, the chapter titles of *Literature of the Early Twentieth Century* imply interesting facts. Devotion of as many pages to “Women Poets” as to “Modern Persian Prose and Fiction between 1900 and 1940” and “A History of Iranian Drama, 1850-1940” combined implies that the mere fact of women poets in early twentieth century Iran was particularly significant. In an introduction to a discussion of eight women poets, readers learn that pre-twentieth century Persian literature was a “male dominated literary sphere” (240). If a standard anthology of Persian verse by Zabiholla Safa called *Ganj-e Sokhan* [Treasure of Speech] offers accurate evidence, only two or three women poets of note are among upwards of 130 prominent poets from the ninth century down to 1940. “Women Poets” by Dominic Parviz Brookshaw presents upwards of fifty Persian texts and quotations from texts of their poems and accompanying English translations. From almost any Anglo-American literary critical perspective, these texts are arguably not memorable poetry *qua* poetry. For example, poetically unpromising for readers are texts that make such statements as: Jannat’s, “If I ever say I derive pleasure from any love but yours / My name must be erased from the list of your lovers” (246); Fakhri’s, “A woman’s beauty lies in her excellence and chastity” (271); Zanddokht’s, “Every nation I have observed, their womenfolk seem respected / But the women of Iran have the dust of humiliation on their heads” (280); Zhaleh’s, “Whatever I said about Europeans / We really must live like they do”³ (295); and Parvin E’tesami’s, “O wise one, do you know the duties of woman and man? / One is the ship, and the other is the ship’s captain” (306) and “Woman is the treasurer, chastity her treasure” (308).⁴ But there is no gainsaying that such women, who, one after the other, describe the lives of oppression and subjugation they were living in the Iran of their day, voiced their hopes, as best they could, for a better future for Iranian women, a future unrealized, by most accounts, a century later in the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979-).

³ Ali-Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, in his *Mirror of Dew: The Poetry of Ālam-Tāj Zhāleh Qā’em-Maqāmi* (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2014), presents the texts and translations of Zhaleh Qa’em-Maqami’s poetry, which does include several poems with poetic appeal. *Mirror of Dew* has been reviewed by Saeed Yousef in *SCTIW Review* (July 21, 2015), <<http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/647>> and by Michael Craig Hillmann in “Marriage Iranian Style: The Sad Story of an Iranian Woman Poet” at <www.utexas.edu/Academia.edu/MichaelHillmann>.

⁴ The most famous and most discussed Iranian woman poet ever, until Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967), Parvin E’tesami (1907-1941) is the subject of *Once a Dewdrop: Essays on the Poetry of Parvin E’tesami* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1993), edited by Heshmat Moayyad, and translations of her poems by Moayyad and Margaret Madelung appear in *A Nightingale’s Lament: Selections from the Poems and Fables of Parvin E’tesami* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1985).

Moreover, their statements were bold, transgressive, and modern in content, even if ignored by their contemporary reading public or, for the most part, not made public until years later—even if not memorable *qua* poetry.

Given the asserted status of Persian poetry as a core to Iranian identity in the minds of many educated Iranians and the emergence of a dynamic modernist Persian poetry in the period following the banishment of Reza Shah Pahlavi from Iran in 1941, Chapter 6, “Translations of European Poetry and Their Reception,” and Chapter 2, “Poetry as Awakening: Singing Modernity,” should attract special attention. In the former, Parvin Loloi does not cite the translations of any classic or influential late nineteenth or early twentieth century European and American poems, but rather focuses attention on the role of the press, literary debates (between Iranian traditionalists and so-called modernists), political and patriotic poetry, poetry and women’s emancipation, and “domestication of the foreign.” She also offers this explanation for the apparent paucity of direct translations of contemporary European poems: “perhaps only a few Western-educated intellectuals would have been able to understand the complex metaphorical language of Western poetry” (342). According to many readers and critics,⁵ the most popular and classic American poem of the early twentieth century is Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken” (1915), in the twenty lines of which poetry lovers would be hard pressed to find “complex metaphorical language.” So, perhaps the issue was the dearth of Iranian poets or poetry experts competent in French or English.

The lengthiest chapter in [*Persian*] *Literature of the Early Twentieth Century* is editor Seyed-Gohrab’s “Poetry as Awakening: Singing Modernity,” a rich discussion divided into sections on: “abandonment of classical themes,” “themes and topics of the Constitutional Revolution poetry,” “new gender relations and reactions,” “nationalistic tendencies in poetry,” “pro-German and anti-British and anti-Russian sentiments,” “poetic forms,” “the *ghazal* as a political device,” “singing freedom—the Persian ballad (*tasnif*),” “new poetic forms,” “folk poetry in a Constitutional setting,” and “poetry and newspapers.” Modern(ist) Persian poetry blossomed during the 1941-1979 period, which means that its readers would have good reason to study Persian poetry of the 1900-1941 period to see how later poetry evolved from the earlier period, a subject that Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak insightfully examines in *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran*,⁶ where he reaches the conclusion that pre-Reza Shah poetry set the scene for the later modernist poetry of Nima Yushij, Ahmad Shamlu, Sohrab Sepehri, Mehdi Akhavan Sales, Forugh Farrokhzad, et al. Readers can judge for themselves how modern(ist) 1900-1940 Persian poetry was, on the basis of upwards of fifty excerpts from poems in the original Persian followed by English translations. At the same time, they may reach the conclusion suggested above with respect to women’s poetry of the era, that little of the poetry seems memorable *qua* poetry from a practical literary critical perspective. Another question may also come to mind for informed readers: Did the Persian poetry of the 1900-1940 period compete favorably at the time for reader attention and appeal vis-à-vis, for example, Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh* [Book of Kings] (1010), *ghazals* and *Spiritual Couplets* [*Masnavi-ye Ma’navi*] by Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273), or Hafez’s fourteenth century *ghazals*?

Closely related to Chapter 2 is Chapter 4, “Satire in Persian Literature, 1900-1940,” by Homa Katouzian, which features Persian examples from more than fifty verse compositions

⁵ E.g., David Orr, *The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015).

⁶ Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995).

accompanied by English translations. Katouzian situates early twentieth century satirical verse in the context of Persian satire in the so-called classical period from 900 to 1500. For example, he cites Rumi, the most famous Persian Sufi poet ever, as a satirist as follows:

Rumi's *Mathnawi* is packed with satire and irony, more or less subtle. But he also has some virtual pornographic tales, a well-known one of which is the story of the lady without a male partner who discovered that her slave girl lets the donkey in the stable have sex with her, not suspecting that she uses a pumpkin as a buffer: "She saw the prick but did not see the pumpkin," Rumi jibes. She tried to imitate her slave girl without the use of the pumpkin and died as a result: "She died a disreputable death, my friend / by the donkey's prick—can you believe?—was she martyred." (163-164)

It so happens that no woman writer's name appears among the score of early twentieth century male satirists Katouzian cites and discusses. But women play a visible role as objects of ridicule in the Iranian satire of the period that Katouzian cites. For example, the first illustration of twentieth century satire is this couplet by Aref Qazvini: "O, open the door of your house to whores /and outside the door have your wife turn everyone into whore-mongers." As another example, in his discussion of Iraj Mirza (1874-1926), "the leading poet of the late Qajar era" (186), Katouzian devotes significant space to a

...story in *Aref-nameh* against *hejab*, which, although brilliant, is too explicit to be directly quoted in polite society. Briefly, the narrator says that a young man had once invited a woman into his home on a bogus pretext. He had then asked the woman to show her face and the woman had severely rebuked him.... As a result, he had changed tactics and, instead, made physical passes at the woman. The woman had responded positively and they had ended up copulating while she was holding fast onto her *hejab*, refusing to show her face.... The poet then concludes that ignorant women wearing the face veil *neqab* are far less capable of defending their honor than liberated women. (198-199)

Katouzian's first example of satirical verse "in the period between the 1921 coup [by Reza Khan] and the fall of the Qajars in 1925" is the following "poetic" reply by Mirzadeh Eshqi (1893-1924) to a *qasideh* "in praise of Reza Khan" by Hasan Vahid Dastgerdi:

O Vahid Dastgerdi, you filthy-mouthed sheikh
 who (have) called the filth of your own mouth poetry!
 O louse-eating sheikh in torn-off rags
 who mistake poetry for the filth in your mouth!
 Your skin coat is like a bear's skin on a dog's shoulder,
 your garment looks like a shroud around a baboon,
 your turban is like a turd wrapped in plaster.
 Look in the mirror if you doubt my word...
 every word of yours is like a fart in the air;
 your tongue in your mouth is like shit in a basin.
 They say you wrote a panegyric for Sardar-e Sepah [Rezâ Khân];
 by God, your eulogy for him is as bad as disparagement,

although you wrote the panegyric for money.
 Say what you please, little fraud, and be fêted.
 But why did you say at the end of the eulogy
 that 'Aref and 'Eshqi are ill-wishers of the homeland?
 Do 'Aref and 'Eshqi take money from the British, as you say?
 I spit on your face, o worthless slave-maid of the British minister! (178-179)

Katouzian concludes his informative survey of Persian satire in the 1900-1940 period with a consideration of prose writing by Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997) and Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951). First he treats Jamalzadeh's much discussed "watershed" collection of short stories called *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* [Once upon a Time] (1921) especially the story called "Farsi Shekar'ast" [Persian Is (as Sweet as) Sugar].⁷ A special significance to that story, according to Katouzian, lies in the fact that:

All the principal socio-cultural types among twentieth century Iranians are represented in the story: the traditionalist [male Shi'ite cleric], the pseudo-modernist [European-educated male], the common man [lower class provincial male], normally led by the first or second type, and the modern type [avuncular, middle-aged, urban, Persian-speaking, *farsi* male], who was neither an obscurantist nor so in awe of Europe or things European as to have lost his cultural and psychological balance. Seen from this angle, this short story would seem to have mapped out the basic sociology of Iran in the twentieth century long before it came into full view. (218)

But, even if fifty percent of the Iranian population did not constitute a "principal socio-cultural type" in the 1900-1940 period, literary evidence contradicting any assertion that the basic sociology of the whole century was exclusively male appears, for example, in the life of Forugh Farrokhzad (1935-1967) and memorable poems of hers such as "I Feel Sorry for the Garden" (1964), which reveals five "socio-cultural types" of Iranians⁸ other than the four in "Persian Is Sugar." In addition, "I Feel Sorry for the Garden" ("garden" here signifying Iranian culture) voices a view of contemporary Iranian society that implies how Iranians might save their culture, whereas the satire in Jamalzadeh's "Persian Is Sugar" both absolves Iranian males, such as its narrator, from any responsibility insofar as they are observers above the fray. Why, for instance, did not the narrator (or lifelong expatriate writer Jamalzadeh) propose that the four cellmates devise an escape plan? Farrokhzad also has other poems that depict an Iran that includes women and, for that matter, more sorts of men than does the author of "Persian Is Sugar."⁹

⁷ Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, *Once upon a Time*, translated by Heshmat Moayyad and Paul Sprachman (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 1985); reviewed in Michael Craig Hillmann, "Once Upon a Time," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 47, no. 4 (1988): 311-313.

⁸ See: Forugh Farrokhzad, "Delam bara-ye Baghche Misazad," text and translation available at multiple online sites.

⁹ E.g., the independent woman in "Fath-e Bagh" [Conquest of the Garden], the three or four sorts of women described by a knowing speaker in "'Arusak-e Kuki?" [The Wind-up Doll], the despairing Tehran urbanite in the West-struck Iranian 1960s in "Ay Marz-e Porgobar" [O Jewel-studded Land], the naïve, hopeful girl in "Kasi ke Mesl-e Hichkas Nis?" [Someone Who Is not Like Anyone Else], and the iconoclastic woman in "Ejyan-e Khoda" [Divine Rebellion] who rejects the male Islam of a holy book in which hundreds of men are cited by name and only one woman, the male Islam of Sufism lacking a female presence, the male Islam lacking female clergy, and the Islam that gives Iranian men authority over women.

the Iranian period from 1941 until today an unprecedented age of Persian prose, Chapter 3, “Modern Persian Prose and Fiction between 1900 and 1940,” by Seyed-Gohrab is significant in its presentation of the context and potential antecedent for contemporary Persian prose fiction and essay writing. Drawing on Hassan Kamshad’s *Modern Persian Prose Literature*¹⁰ and recent essays in *Encyclopædia Iranica* (1982-),¹¹ Seyed-Gohrab surveys Persian translations of European novels, Persian historical novels, adventure and social protest fiction, and novels treating the plight of Iranian women. But Seyed-Gohrab does not discuss the one work of Persian prose fiction written during the 1900-1940 period that has had significant appeal thereafter, Sadeq Hedayat’s 1937 novella called *Buf-e Kur* [The Blind Owl], is the most famous, controversial, written about, and influential exclusively prose work in the 1,100 year history of Persian literature. *The Blind Owl* will doubtless receive substantial attention in *Modern Fiction and Drama*, Volume XIII of *A History of Persian Literature*. But, because it was a product of the Iranian 1930s, its genesis and connections with that era may have deserved discussion in the chapter on “Modern Persian Prose and Fiction between 1900 and 1940,” as Michael Beard’s *Hedayat’s The Blind Owl as a Western Novel* suggests in its survey of the relevant European and American fictions of the day and the symbolist, surrealist writing that influenced Hedayat and perhaps other Iranian writers who knew French.¹²

Finally, Chapter 9, “The History of Children’s Literature (1900-1940),” by Zohreh Ghaeni deserves mention in the context of Persian prose writing in general. Ghaeni, co-author of the ten-volume *History of Children’s Literature in Iran*,¹³ expertly presents her subject in reviewing: the formative era; literature of the *maktab’khaneh* [traditional elementary school(s)]; classical literary works as children’s literature (e.g., Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*); and translations from European sources (e.g., Aesop’s Fables, fables by Jean de La Fontaine, Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Alexandre Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*, and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne). She also observes that: “Intellectuals who played a role in Reza Shah’s cultural policies and some independent thinkers were against children and adolescents reading adult literature. Ahmad Kasravi, a significant author and critic, condemned these novels as a source of corruption for Iranian young people” (466). As a sample of children’s stories, Ghaeni cites “*Khâle Suske va Âqâ Mushê*” [Auntie Beetle and Mr. Mouse], “a very old and popular Iranian folktale, told for centuries by grandmothers and mothers, about a cockroach looking for a proper husband. At last she finds a mouse (*mush*) as a good partner, because he will only use his very smooth tail to slap her if they ever have a fight” (452). One would hope that that story no longer gets told.

The big stories in twentieth century Persian literature were the emergence of New Persian Poetry [*she’r-e no-we farsî*] and New Persian Fiction [*adabiyât-e dastani-ye nogara-ye farsî*], which most commentators call “modernist” Persian poetry and fiction, which in turn may imply that both literary developments are beholden to European and American literatures. [*Persian*] *Literature of the Early Twentieth Century* makes the case for appreciating the indigenous origins and evolutionary appearance of New Persian Poetry and Fiction and, therefore, deserves special consideration by Persian literature experts working with Persian texts and by

¹⁰ Hassan Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

¹¹ See: “Modern [Persian] Fiction,” “The [Persian] Novel,” and “The [Persian] Short Story” by Houra Yavari, Simin Behbahani et al., *Encyclopædia Iranica* at <www.Iranicaonline.org>.

¹² Michael Beard, *Hedayat’s The Blind Owl as a Western Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

¹³ Mohammad Hadi Mohammadi and Zohreh Ghaeni, *Tarikh-e Adabiyat-e Kudakan-e Iran* [The History of Children’s Literature in Iran] (Tehran: Research Institute for the History of Children’s Literature, 2004-2006).

English-speaking readers who read published translations of those texts.

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Citation Information

Hillmann, Michael Craig, *The Temporal Iranian Prologue to Modern(ist) Persian Literature – A Review of [Persian] Literature of the Early Twentieth Century: From the Constitutional Period to Reza Shah*, *SCTIW Review*, September 8, 2016. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1204>.

ISSN: 2374-9288