

DEVELOPMENTS IN MODERN PERSIAN PROSE

The greatness of Iran's ancient literature cannot be questioned. Persian poets long ago explored and perfected most of the techniques of poetry and still inspire poets of every nation. The modern literary movement in Iran proves that the Iranian literary genius has continued strong. It seems, however, that the most important developments have been in prose. This may partly be due to the extent and excellence of past endeavours in poetry. It must also be due to the role of Western culture in the modern Iranian literary revival. The new subjects were better expressed in prose than in traditional Persian poetry.

During the Safavid period (1499-1722 A.D.), the educated were chiefly engaged in proselytism, administration and war. It was not an age of outstanding literary achievement. Prose was devoted mainly to religious tracts and clever despatches to the Court of the Ottoman enemy. The Safavid Monarchs wanted to weld Iran into a unit with a group loyalty strong enough to withstand, if not rival, the Sunnī Ottoman Caliphate. They decreed that their own family's Shī'ī tenets should be the religion of Iran, and Shī'ī missionaries were brought from Syria, the Hījāz and Bahrain to preach to their subjects. These missionaries' ignorance of Persian is well known¹, but it was these men who had to write religious works, both for popular consumption and for the learned. Their style of writing did not have a good effect on Persian prose.

By modern standards, Persian prose at the beginning of the Safavid period was not in a healthy condition. During Mongol and Timurid times, from the 13th to the 15th centuries, the Arabic element had increased enormously. This cannot wholly be condemned because the influx of Arabic increased the flexibility and resources of what was already a very resourceful language. This resourcefulness is shown in the Persian writings of Ibn Sīnā and Al-Bīrūnī, and the *Siāsat-nāmeḥ* and *Qābūsnāmeḥ* of the 11th century A.D. These works prove that Arabic was merely an addition to an already rich store. The Arabic element when manipulated by a great master like Sa'ādī (died 1291) is, moreover, an adornment of great beauty. Samarqandī's *Chahār Maqāla* of the 12th century, though full of Arabic, is a masterpiece neither unpleasant to read nor lacking in clarity. The evil began with the degeneration of this style in the hands of less gifted writers. In a work like Juwaynī's *Tārikh-i-Gahān-Gusha* of the late 13th century, the Arabic element, with numerous epithets and synonyms, leads to sickening over-ornamentation. Meaning is often obscured. There may have been wisdom in this at the time: apparent abuse of Persian to obscure meaning need not always be blamed on the writers' bad taste.

¹ See E. G. Browne. *Literary History of Persia*. (Cambridge 1951) Volume 4. p. 360.

Unfortunately by the beginning of the Safavid era a highly ornamented arabicised style had come to be the acme of good writing. Subtle ambiguities and a mastery of Arabic vocabulary were the hallmarks of intellectual attainment. Though the Safavids wanted their people to be instructed in Shi'ī doctrine, the introduction of Arab theologians² made impossible the writing of works in simple Persian such as earlier Ismā'īlī missionaries had produced³. According to Dr. Sa'īd Nafīsī⁴ Al-Bīrūnī and Ibn Sīnā used in their Persian writings a deliberately simple style as Ismā'īlī partisans aiming to instruct the lay reader. The Safavid tract writers, on the other hand, not primarily literary artists at all, filled volume after volume of religious works, (in which lay the road to preferment), using a style of language modern Persian writers have striven to avoid.

This style had none of the virtues of controlled choice of apposite Arabic words and figures of speech, but all the vices of a style made up of an artificial foreign element indulged in by writers wishing to show off learning. After the fall of the Safavids it was no longer confined to religious works. With the rise of Nādir Shāh the historian came into his own again and the degree to which the misused Arabic element had corrupted Persian is shown in the style adopted by a writer like Mirzā Mahdī Khān to describe Nādir Shāh's martial splendours.

The first Qājār King was crowned in 1796 A.D., and a period of social change closely linked with the modern literary revival began. Centralization of government led to a new civil service resulting in a class of professional people earning their living as clerks and having leisure to cultivate letters. The new class of writers and readers were no longer exclusively clergy, but a laity wanting stories and news about the world outside. A new public was thus created.

From the beginning of the 19th century, with European powers in India, Iran became involved in European affairs. After defeat by the Russians, Iran's rulers were awakened to the backwardness of the Empire compared with their neighbours. Notable among those awakened was Mirzā Tāghī Khān, the Amīr-i-Kabīr. He was Prime Minister when Nāṣir-al-Dīn Shāh ascended the throne in 1848 A.D. Mirzā Tāghī Khān had been to Russia and realised that if Iran was to remain independent urgent reforms were needed in education and administration. One of the greatest Iranians of modern times, Mirzā Tāghī Khān was the first to take strong action in answer to the need for reform. Modern Persian prose literature began, partly to publish this need, and in part to satisfy it.

² See Browne op. cit. pp. 54 and 360.

³ For example the *Haft Bab-i-Baba Sayyidna*: Text published by Ivanow Bombay 1933, Islamic Research Association.

⁴ Introduction to Volume I *Shāhkarha-yi-Naṣr-i-Farsi-yi-Mu'āṣir*, Teheran 1951.

Tāghī Khān's master, Qā'im Maqām Farahānī, Minister to Muḥammad Shāh (1834-1848), began to reduce the decorativeness of official correspondence. Tāghī Khān carried on his work and his master, Nāṣir-al-Dīn Shāh, chose a very simple Persian for his diaries. The modern world was something compelling to write about: paucity of subject matter no longer left room for complex elaborations. Journeys abroad led to travel books, a literary fashion with the seal of royal sanction. The Persians had always been fond of travelogues and biography, so this fashion was not in itself new, but the style was. The travel books were the first fruits of the new prose shaping itself to describe observed reality for a widening circle of readers. Lithography was followed by printing, introduced in Tabriz in 1816 A.D. In 1851 the Dār-al-Funūn, a Technical College, was opened in Teheran and in 1864 Iran was linked to Europe and India by the telegraph. These are factors marking the beginning of a renaissance in speech and thought.

Towards the end of the 19th century the travel diaries increased. Nāṣir-al-Dīn Shāh himself published two. The secretary preparing the Shāh's *Diary of a Journey to Karbalā* (*Rūznāmeḥ-yi-Safar-i-Karbela*) for the press felt obliged to apologise for its simple style lest it should be supposed that the Shāh was deficient in education. The secretary explained that the style was free from superfluous ornament and an exercise in brevity of speech to be more easily understood by the commonality. As Dr. Khānlārī says⁵, if these travel diaries, many of which have not been printed, were collected they would provide important data on the political and geographical situation and about the minds of many leading men in Iran at the close of the 19th century. For information about conditions on the eve of the constitutional revolution of 1906, *the Travel Diary of Ibrāhīm Beg* is very useful, and marks a development of the travel diary of a kind doubtless not anticipated by the Royal Diarist.

The Siyāhat Nāmeḥ-yi-Ibrāhīm Beg by Zayn-al-Ābidīn of Marāgha was published in three volumes in three different places. The first is undated and was printed in Cairo; the second, of which this writer's copy is dated 1325/1907, was printed in Calcutta, and the third, the only one bearing the author's name, came out in Istanbul in 1327/1909. This book and the *Masālik-al-Muḥsinīn* (Cairo 1323/1905) and the *Kitāb-i-Aḥmad-ya-Safīneh-yi-Ṭālebi* (Istanbul 1312/1894 and volume II 1314/1896) of Mirzā ʿAbdul Raḥīm Najārzādeh Ṭabrīzī, called Talibof, constitute a most important landmark in the history of modern Persian literature. The story of Ibrāhīm Beg's travels is a satire describing the journey to Iran of a young man, brought up in Cairo of Iranian parentage, to be a strong patriot, by a father who loved his

⁵ Collected papers of the First Congress of Iranian Writers, Teheran 1326/1946 p. 135.

country with great fervor. When Ibrāhīm Beg eventually visited the paradise described by his father, he found it full of misery and corruption. These he describes, with frequent comparisons between the dismal present and the glorious past. As the hero is a hero and a fictitious one at that, this work may be classed among the first modern Persian novels. Its language is the spoken language. The writing is not without imperfections but is vivid in a way that makes it a delight to read. As a source-book for the state of Iran at the beginning of this century the travel diary of Ibrāhīm Beg is invaluable. It is also the assertion in three printed volumes of the right of the spoken language to be the vehicle of literary expression.

Talibof's *Masālik-al-Muḥsinin* is a travel book of another kind. This time the journey is in the realms of modern science and the author wanted to introduce his readers to modern scientific methods. His *Kitāb-i-Aḥmad* is a kind of child's guide to modern science. The Persian is simple. Both writers were intent on social problems: the author of Ibrāhīm Beg revealed the misgovernment and foreign incursions under which Iran was suffering, while Talibof showed up the evils of an educational system in no way adapted to modern times.

In 1905 the Persian text of *Ḥājjī Bābā* was published in Calcutta, after the English version by James Morier. The Persian edition set a standard for modern writing in the language of the people. The vernacular idiom is reproduced with all the grace and liveliness of ordinary Persian speech. This book is one of the most important memorials in the new style of Persian prose.

In 1894 Prince Muḥammad Ṭāhir's translation of the *Count of Monte Cristo* appeared on the orders of the Shāh. Families used to gather to hear this work read aloud, showing the extent of popular interest in the new literature. Iran's interest over the past 40 years in literary experiments is reminiscent of Elizabethan London, when translations and new forms of expression were subjects of eager discussion as they have been in Teheran since 1890.

Translation has played a vital part in the modern Iranian literary movement and early translations of drama helped to overcome prejudices against the use of the spoken word in written works. For centuries nobody had dreamed of writing as they would speak. The spoken language was considered too vulgar and too terse for the written document. Moreover, there was a variety of spoken languages: the Court spoke Turkish while writing in Persian, dialects differed very considerably from place to place throughout the vast country and each city had its own idiom. These differences were reduced as centralization in Teheran increased and the secretary class, living in Teheran but recruited from all over the Empire, grew. Merchants, teachers and scribes began increasingly to take their cultural standards from the capital and a standard form of Persian spread as communications were facilitated. Through translation, new types of thought and

literature were introduced. The European theatre had fascinated Persian travellers and the Iranians were quick to realise the educational value of the drama. In a very interesting preface to seven plays translated from Azarbaijānī Turkish in 1874, Mirzā Qarachī Dāghī stated his aim to use a language which both the literate and illiterate could understand, so that all may benefit from the lessons exemplified in the plays. He went further: he also tried reproducing the sounds of ordinary speech and drew attention to instances where pronunciation differs from conventional spelling. This was a big step forward. The writing of the spoken language having been introduced, the text problem was whether to represent direct speech as it is heard in a language where sound is often remote from spelling⁶.

Another important feature of the new literature was the newspaper, as was inevitable when critical faculties were being reawakened and political consciousness aroused. European papers and the nascent Arab press in Egypt were strong influences. The first paper was Mirzā Šālīḡ Shirāzī's *Kāghaz-i-Akhhbār*, literally *Newspaper*. Šālīḡ Shirāzī was one of the first students to be sent to Europe and India for modern education. A large number of papers appeared, generally shortlived, though their existence pointed to developing interest in world affairs and the growing political and national consciousness. Mirzā Malkūm Khān, of Armenian origin, brought out his *Qānūn* (Law) in London in 1890. It was forbidden in Iran because of attacks on the rulers. Mirzā Malkūm Khān used a simple, direct style much admired by modern Iranian writers, who consider him an important pioneer in a movement by no means wholly literary, but also political. Malkūm Khān wanted the establishment of a rule of law instead of government according to the whims of an autocrat. The autocrat in question, Nāšir al-Dīn Shāh (died 1896), had sent Malkūm Khān to Britain to get him out of the way. When the exile resorted to journalism he proved that Iran was no longer immune from the lengthening arm of the press.

Other Persian language papers printed abroad were the *Habl'ul-Matin* in Calcutta, (at whose press the Persian *Ḥājji Bāba* was produced), and *Akhtar* which, begun in 1875 in Istanbul, lasted for twentyfive years; while Persian papers also appeared in Cairo. In studying the rise of modern Iranian nationalism, as well as the modern literary movement, these papers are of first importance.

From the literary standpoint probably the most interesting of the Persian papers outside Iran was the second series of *Kaveh*, issued in Berlin between 1920 and 1921 in monthly editions of many pages. *Kaveh* was named after the blacksmith famous in Iranian legend as the defender of liberty using his leather apron for a banner. It was

⁶ See an article in the *Bulletin of the London School of Oriental and African Studies*, Vol. XIV, part 3, by J. A. Boyle, for a study of the way two modern Persian authors have tackled this problem.

edited by the distinguished scholar and patriot, Taghizādeh. In his leading article to the first number, H. E. Senator Taghizādeh declared the aims of his journal to include the purifying of the Persian language, the combatting of fanaticism, the spread of European culture and science in Iran and the preservation and extension of Persian literature. This article might be taken as the manifesto of the modern Iranian literary movement.

Following the constitutional revolt in 1906 influential newspapers in Iran itself were a sign of the newly gained articulateness of the nation. *The Šūr-i-Isrāfīl* (Trumpet of Isrāfīl) was the vehicle for a series of articles by Dekhuda, who, signing himself Dakhau, began his great services to modern Persian letters with articles called *Charand Parand* (Balderdash). These marked the arrival of a literary genius of the first order. In these satirical pieces, Dekhuda skilfully employed the idioms of the popular speech and parodied the Arabic style of writing practised by the clergy. In 1310/1943 Dekhūda's collection of the numerous sayings that are the salt and savour of spoken Persian appeared in his *Amsāl va Hikam* (Proverbs and Aphorisms)⁷. The proverbs represent the distillation of the folklore of one of the most ancient and distinctive civilizations in the world. An outstanding feature of the modern prose is the extensive use of these sayings and idioms, and Dekhuda's collection is, therefore, very useful as a reference book for the student of modern Persian literature.

In Persian the aphorism cannot always be easily distinguished from the ordinary statement expressed idiomatically. The spoken language is full of idioms whose sense and relevance to a particular situation generally need explanation for the uninitiated. Thus it is not easy for the foreigner to understand the works of many modern writers. Dictionaries are not much help, though Ha'īm's *One Volume Persian-English Dictionary* (Teheran 1953) sometimes gives the answer⁸. In 1906 the Bengal Asiatic Society published a list of about three hundred and sixty-two "Common Saws and Proverbs" collected in Southern Persia by Lt. Col. Phillot; but a great deal of work remains for the student of Persian to accomplish in this field. The sayings are often purely local. They are, after all, an oral tradition and part and parcel of local speech. An Isfahānī speaking to a Teherānī and wishing to use an Isfahānī expression will generally preface his remark by "As we say in Isfahan." Many of the sayings do, however, occur in the classical poets. Some of them may have passed into current use as

⁷ For many years Dekhūda has also been collecting material for a very large Dictionary, rather on the lines of Larousse, which is now being issued in parts.

⁸ Other works worth referring to in this connection are the *Farhang-i-Amanieh* of Yūsuf Raḥmatī, Teheran 1320, *Dāstanha-ye-Amsāl* and *Hazār-o-yek Sukhan dar Amsāl va Nisāyeh va Hikam* by Amirgoli Aminī (Isfahan), *Jame'al-Tamsil* Teheran (1328), Professor Levy's article in the Bulletin of the London School of Oriental and African Studies, Vol. XIV. Pt. 3 and Elwell-Sutton's *Persian Proverbs, Wisdom of the East* Series 1955.

quotations. On the other hand, the poets themselves may have culled them from oral tradition already ancient in their own time, thus helping to preserve them. The modern prose writers in not hesitating to use these sayings extensively may, therefore, be following an ancient precedent.

An ancient forerunner in the satirical vein developed by Dehkhūda over forty years ago in the *Charand Parand* articles, was ʿUbaid-i-Zākānī (died 1371 A.D.), to whose works⁹ the student of modern Persian literature is invariably referred by contemporary Iranian writers. There is every reason to suppose that Dehkhūda's articles were a source of inspiration to a second great master, Muḥammad ʿAlī Jamalzādeh, who entered the field with his collection of stories, *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* ("Once upon a time ..."), published in Berlin in 1339/1920-21. Jamalzādeh not only brilliantly blazed the trail for the new prose, he also introduced the modern Persian short story. So much did Jamalzādeh use popular idioms that he appended to the stories a short dictionary of some of them. Here, with a vengeance, was the language of the people. The first story, *Farsi Shekar Ast* (Persian in Sugar)¹⁰, parodies the modes of speech of the "Frenchified" student just back from Europe, the mulla with his Arabic phrases and the ordinary Iranian waiter with the unadulterated Persian of his district. The story is very good and extremely funny; it seems improbable that it could ever successfully be translated into another language.

The short story is very old and dear to Iran. Modern authors have been influenced by Western writers in this genre and the names of de Maupassant and Edgar Allan Poe are often mentioned in this connection. But in using this form, writers of the present day are simply returning to the traditional *Hekiyah* or anecdote, though this has been given a new kind of plot and subject matter. Jamalzādeh expressed the trend towards external reality and people in his preface to *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* when he said that the short story and the novel are the best means of mirroring the morals and minds of nations and describing the way of life of different classes of society.

Probably the greatest literary genius of modern Iran is Sadegh Hedayat. Like Jamalzādeh, Hedayat was chiefly influenced by France, and he also specialised in the short story. Born in 1903, he died in Paris in 1951. He is a writer who, deserving nothing short of detailed study, cannot be treated justly here. His work must however be noticed as the culmination of this period of Iranian letters; he is the

⁹ A useful edition of the *Kuliāt-i-ʿUbaid-i-Zakānī* was printed last year, prepared by ʿAbbās Iqbāl Ashtiānī of Teheran University and published by the Sharq Press.

¹⁰ It is not irrelevant to notice that, when an Iranian drinks tea, he generally places the sugar—a piece of "qand"—on the tongue, not in the tea, which is then allowed to filter through the sugar in the mouth.

Shakespeare to the Marlowes, Jonsons and Lylys of his age. He wrote three plays, two of which were on historical themes of which he was fond, about Iran before it was overwhelmed by the Arabs and Islam. He also wrote two travelogues, one of which — *Isfahān* — has been printed, works on Iranian folklore and old Iran, translations and articles, including an important essay on Kafka, and, from 1930 to 1948, about fifty short-stories (that are known) in Persian, besides two in French. But it is not in the quantity or the fineness of his work that the whole sum of Hedayat's greatness lies. In his everyday life, to those privileged to know him and be taken into his confidence, and particularly to the poor, ordinary and unpretentious, Hedayat showed himself a man of rare qualities. Because he was careless over printing and distributing his books, it is fortunate that since his death their publication has been undertaken by a committee consisting of members of his family and old friends ¹¹.

Hedayat possessed the great writer's gift, which is the power to understand a wide range of emotions. He also had the absolute sincerity that must go with this gift if it is to lead to great literature. He fled from all forms of pretence. He believed that our lives are controlled by a blind destiny unconcerned with merit and justice, and he was incapable of pretending that there was room for hope in a world that filled him with gloom. Perhaps the reason for his suicide lies in his inability to deceive himself about final issues. Religion held no solace for him and, significantly, he was attracted by the quatrains of 'Umar Khayyām. What interested him were the underdogs, the unfortunate and beaten. He wrote about these with superb mastery of Persian. Every word from the most wretched of men was of supreme importance to him when uttered in the hard unforgettable idiom of his own people. Every scene of misery and despair was ineffaceably printed on his vision, which was that of an absolute artist. Passages of great beauty resulted and, as is to be expected in the work of such a sincere writer, his style is quite free from any trace of artificiality and remains a splendid example of the abiding genius of Iran.

By the nineteen thirties, the field had been captured by the short-story and novel. The literature of scholarship, however, also had noteworthy contributions. The literary renaissance was accompanied by a revival of learning. Leeway had to be made up in the modern sciences of the west and efforts had also to be made to establish knowledge of Iran's own great cultural heritage in the light of modern scholarship. To this end men like Taghizādeh, Qzavinī, Ghānī, Sa'īd Nafīsī, Shafaq, Minovī and many others, were working and much useful work has been done for the preservation of Iranian literature and antiquities. One of the greatest scholars of Rezā Shāh's reign was Muḥammad

¹¹ See Vol. 63 No. 148, 1949 of *Life and Letters* for admirable translations and notes on Hedayat by H. D. Graves Law, and also Roget Lescot's French version of the novel *Buf-i-Kur*, *Le Hibou Aveugle*.