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BEHBAHANI, SIMIN II. POETRY

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ii. Poetry

Simin Behbahani's initial engagement with poetry coincided with a tumultuous period in the country's literary history, marked by the emergence of an increasing number of poets who, following in the footsteps of Nima Yushij, did not adhere to the metrics and regularity of rhyme visible and audible in classical Persian poetry. Notwithstanding her studied familiarity with the poetry of Nima Yushij and its impact on the works of many later poets in Iran and in the countries that share a literary tradition with Persian poetry, Behbahani did not employ Nimaic metric schemes, arguing that an approach based on the composition of long and short lines had serious limitations, and that the length of lines could only vary in a limited number of meters which yield to the repetition of one or more "feet" (*rokn*; Behbahani, 1999a, p. 803). Neither a proper modern poet nor a traditionalist she was as comfortable with Iran's literary past as she was with Iran's literary present and it was this broad, inclusive approach that made her chosen path in poetry so notably significant (Brookshaw, p. 90; Dānešvar, p. 12; Karimi-Hakkak, 2014-2015, p. 279).

In her introduction to *Jā-ye pā*, entitled "*Vazn dar šeʿr-e qadim: baḥṯ-e moḵtaṣari rājeʿ be šeʿr o taḥavvol-e ān dar Irān*," (Meter in classic poetry: a brief discussion on poetry and its evolution in Iran), she reflects on the history of poetry in Iran, on why meter or what might be termed rhythmic structure is

an integral component of Persian poetry, on the social message that art provides, and she charts the path along which her poetry strives to transform the themes, elements, and attitudes traditionally associated with the ghazal as a genre. “I have tried to change the current meters of the ghazal by incorporating parts of natural, everyday speech, which in their natural setting may seem devoid of any obvious metrical design. By repeating and extending the meters of a beginning segment, I create a new pattern, free of the set patterns in traditional ghazals and free of the set themes and expressions associated with them … while at the same time, keeping the overall geometric shape of the conventional ghazal…. So I can create a fresh metric design for every fresh ghazal based on the meters of the first phrase that comes to my mind” (Behbahani, 1999b, p. xxiii).

Her efforts to push the aesthetics boundaries of the classical Persian poetry and challenge the readers’ perception of the genre of ghazal was well manifested in *Rastāḵiz* (Resurrection), an aptly titled collection published, following an eleven-year hiatus, in 1973. The collection, as indicated by a critic, was Behbahani’s exercises in severance from the period that included *Marmar*, *Jā-ye pā*, and *Čelčerāḡ* (Mojābi, p. 63), and included “Az buta-ye ḵošbu-ye golpar” (From the fragrant marjoram bush; pp. 83-84)—a ghazal composed in a hitherto unprecedented meter, a technique that she would, in later collections, demonstrate more frequently and that comes to be considered one of the primary characteristics of her poetry (see below). In an article entitled “Nimā-ye ḡazal: Simin” (The Nima of ghazal: Simin) ʿAli Moḥammad Ḥaqšenās makes note of *Rastāḵiz* as the point of departure for “[T]he foundational change in thought, world view, ideals and desires of the poet, as well as her approach to poetry” (Ḥaqšenās, pp. 135-36; see also Barzegar).

Notwithstanding the differences seen in the various schools, the unit of thought in traditional ghazals remains for the most part limited to a single line. The Persian ghazal after Hafez, as Ehsan Yarshater asserts, does not typically follow a sustained narrative and “usually consists of a number of lines and statements largely independent of each other. In a sense, one can say that each line of a ghazal … is often a short poem in which a poetic idea, theme, or motif is expressed” (Yarshater, Ḡazal ii. Characteristics and Conventions). In Behbahani’s repertoire, however, adherence to the principle of thematic unity appears as a persistent concern, and in so doing she has fashioned a new poetic fabric for the ghazal and has created a novel dialectic

with which she engages in the introduction, elaboration, and refinement of significant departures from, and innovations to, the foundational elements of the genre. The old metric schemes had, as she held, become irrevocably intertwined with the archaic language of the classical ghazals, which was traditionally devoid of the vernacular, and replete with intricate allusions, metaphors, and tropes. Furthermore, it often expressed a motif selected from a limited repertoire: "a description of the beloved's beauty, a lament of the poet's separation from the beloved, a praise of wine and inebriation, a description of a natural scene such as a garden, a satire of hypocrisy, or an allegory of the lover's state" (Ibid.).

Behbahani, as several critics have pointed out, managed, within the structure of the ghazal, to give expression to new subject matters with new meanings not heretofore encountered in the classical tradition (Ḥaqšenās, pp.155-56). War and its effects, poverty, lawlessness, and tyranny are among the complex issues that she tackles (Karimi-Hakkak, 1997, p. 207). Although there are long-standing precedents in addressing societal ills with poetry, especially from the Constitutional Period onward, perhaps the language of no other composer of ghazal is so well suited to portraying and addressing political, cultural, and social issues. "She adopted an autobiographical voice, used individual expressions, employed everyday speech, and accepted cosmopolitan openness and respect for pluralism in these poems." (Milani, 2011, pp. 162-63) Often creating a narrative and providing a versified short story, she mastered an idiom, which she would employ not only to address general concerns and values (Musavi, p. 14), but also to render the subject matter thematically in a number of different ways, exercising economy in cinematic delineation of scenes and episodes (ʿĀṣemi, pp. 136-39), and in the use of figures of speech, an approach much more in line with the precepts of Nimaic verse than classical Persian poetry (Ātaši, p. 22). Her noted poem, "Mardi ke yek pā nadārad," offers a rewarding example.

Šalvār-e tā-ḵorda dārad, mardi ke yek pā nadārad
Ḵašm-ast o ātaš negāhaš, yaʿni: tamašā nadārad …
Guyam ke bā mehrbāni, ḵˇāham šakibāʾi az u
Pandaš daham mādarāna, giram ke parvā nadārad
Ru mikonam su-ye u bāz, tā goft-o gu-i konam sāz
Raft-ast o ḵālist jāyaš, mardi ke yek pā nadārad
("Mardi ke yek pā nadārad," *Majmuaʿ-ye ašʿār*, Tehran, 2003, pp. 868-69)

He has folded up the leg of his pants

There is rage and fire in his eyes, meaning there is nothing to see …
I thought with kindness, I shall ask patience for him,
I shall offer motherly counsel even if he is unmindful
I turn to him again to start a conversation,
His place is empty, he is gone, the man with a missing leg.

("The Man With a Missing Leg," *My Country, I Shall Build You Again*, pp. 196-99; for an analysis of the poem and its innovative imagery see Yusofi, 2005; see also Karimi-Hakkak, 2015)

Despite her keen engagement with social structures, practices and institutions and her unwavering awareness of their rigid nature, her poetry never devolved into sloganeering, a trait that has not gone unnoticed by critics (Pahlavān, p. 43, Nuriʿalaʾ, p. 165). One can easily argue that this eschewing of slogans and epigrammatic expressions has a resultant corollary: an intrinsic genuineness in her social poems that derives inspiration in mixing self-reflection with contemporary political critique (Rezvani, p. 72). The combination of public and private in her ghazals allows a personal perspective on contemporary sociopolitical realities to permeate its fantastical universe and even circumvent its conventions.

Her collection *Dašt-e Aržan* comprises sixteen ghazals that bear the title 'Kowoli-vāra' (Gypsyesque). These poems, along with five quatrains, address the persona of the Kowli, a liberated and passionate woman whose ways are incompatible with societal conventions. "The gypsy," as posited by Firouzeh Dianat, "is a symbolic figure in Behbahani's poems … [that] inspires the seeking of freedom and breaking through confinement" (Dianat, p. 347).

Kowli be ḥormat-e budan, bāyad tarāna beḵˇāni
šāyad payām-e ḥożuri, tā gušhā beresāni
dud-e tanura-ye divān, suzānda češm o galu rā
barkeš ze vaḥšat-e in šab, faryād agar betavāni
("Kowli-vāra: 13," *Majmuʿa-ye ašʿār*, Tehran, 2003, pp. 662-63)

Sing, gypsy, sing
in homage to being you must sing
let ears register your presence.
Eyes and throats burn from the smoke
that trails the monsters as they soar in the sky.
Scream if you can of the terrors of this night

(Farzaneh Milani, *Words not Swords*, p. 169)

Behbahani's familiarity with the Arabic language and Persian literature often loaded her poems with imagery drawn from Quranic verses and the rich reservoir of Persian literature and lore (for a comprehensive study on imagery and allusions in Behbahani's poetry, see Aḥmad Abu Maḥbub, *Gahvāra-ye sabz-e afrā,* pp. 205-63). "What marks the weave of Simin Behbahani's poetry is a familiar traditional pattern, unspoken, which the Iranian reader observes tacitly behind the poem. It may be so familiar that there is no need to be particularly aware of it … Behbahani is a poet whose honesty goes right down to the details of her search for the right word, the pen in hand and the thought spiraling inward to express itself, a close observer, a poet with technical precision and a heart. And the heart beats in English as well" (Beard, pp. xii-xiii).

Her innovations notwithstanding, the ghazal also offered Behbahani an extensive reservoir of amorous and erotic love themes—the genre's mainstay. In most of Behbahani's work, love and amorous relationships are flavored by autobiographical overtones. Contrary to the traditional ghazal that deals with stock images and allusions and seldom elucidates on the poet's personal experiences, her amorous ghazals often address a particular issue in the emotional relationships between two people.

Gofti ke mibusam tow rā, goftam tamannā mikonam
Gofti agar binad kasi, goftam ke ḥāšā mikonam …
Gofti agar az pā-ye ḵod zanjir ʿešqat vākonam?
Goftam ze tow divāna-tar, dāni ke peydā mikonam
"Goft-o-gu," *Majmuʿa-ye ašʿār*, Tehran, 2003, p. 452)

You said I will kiss you, I said it is what I wish
You said what if someone sees? I said I shall deny it …
You said what if from my ankles I remove the shackles of your love
I said crazier than you, you know I shall find
("Conversation," *My Country, I Shall Build You Again*, pp. 102-5)

Behbahani, as her poems indicate, writes from the point of view of a woman in love. Many of her ghazals, even the less explicit compositions, clearly express the love of a female for a male lover and herald a departure from the traditional ghazals composed primarily by men and reflecting a masculine outlook and emotions (see BELOVED). Her efforts in capturing a feminine

perspective in the ghazal were not without controversy. Some critics, such as Mehri Šāh Ḥosayni, have praised her for having been successful and even trend setting (Šāh-Ḥosayni, pp. 493-94), while others who have considered her love poems from a feminist point of view, such as Mehri Behfar, find her, for the most part, to have sustained the male-oriented tradition which prevailed in ghazals throughout the centuries (Behfar, pp. 451-71). A good number of the most famous and most recognized contemporary Persian love poems, marked by a precise description of emotions, innovative use of similes and metaphors, and above all, the musicality of words, have been composed by Behbahani.

Setāra dida foru bast o āramid biā
Šarāb-e nur be raghā-ye šab david biā
Ze bas be dāman-e šab ašk-e enteẓāram riḵt
Gol-e sepida šekoft o saḥar damid biā
("Šarāb-e nur" *Majmuʿa-ye ašʿār*, Tehran, 2003, p. 294)

The stars have closed their eyes and gone to sleep, come
The wine of light courses in the veins of the night, come
In waiting I have cried so many tears at night's feet
That the flower of dawn has blossomed and day breaks, come.
("The Wine of Light," *My Country, I shall Build you Again*, pp. 66-68)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

see iv. Selected .