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CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION VII.
THE CONSTITUTIONAL MOVEMENT
IN LITERATURE
*Article by* **Sorour Soroudi**

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**CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION**

vii. The constitutional movement in literature

The term “constitutional literature” refers here to literature produced from the late 19th century until 1339=1300 Š./1921, under the impact of aspirations for reform and the constitutional movement. There were three phases in the development of this literature: the preconstitutional period from the late 19th century to 1323/1905 and the earliest events leading to the constitutional decree (see i, above); the militant phase from 1323/1905 to 1329/1911 and the end of the Second Majles (see ii, above); and the postconstitutional period, from 1329/1911 to 1300 Š./1921 (see iv, above), the beginning of the Pahlavi period.

Constitutional literature, like the constitutional movement itself, reflected social, economic, and cultural developments in Persia in the course of the 19th century (Kamshad, pp. 9-12). These developments contributed to the national and political awakening that culminated in the constitutional movement and

brought about concomitant changes in literary expression. The constitutional movement did not produce a violent revolution, but its professed revolutionary goals created an atmosphere that greatly influenced the literature of the time. It is in this sense that the term “revolutionary” is used in this article. Constitutional literature included works of genuine literary value, but its main significance lay in its function as a link between classical traditions and truly modern work. Furthermore, despite strong parallels, constitutional poetry and prose each followed a distinct course of development.

Constitutional poetry

*Preconstitutonal period.* Participants in the revivalist movement that dominated Persian poetry from the middle of the 18th century had sought a return (*bāzgašt*) to the traditions of the classical masters (see bāzgašt-e adabī). Notwithstanding the creative talent of some Qajar poets, the deliberate avoidance of innovation in theme and style meant that poetry was out of touch with evolving contemporary society and the living language. Social and political consciousness began to develop among writers toward the end of the 19th century, when they occasionally expressed criticism of the ruling class (Šaybānī in Āryanpūr, I, pp. 141-44) and dissatisfaction with emulative poems (Saḥāb Eṣfahānī in Āryanpūr, I, p. 36). Some poets expressed the need to change the course of poetry and to “serenade the motherland (*waṭan*)” instead of the imaginary beloved (Adīb-al-Mamālek [Amīrī] Farāhānī, in Soroudi, 1979, p. 7).

*The militant phase.* The granting of the constitutional charter (*farmān-e mašrūṭīyat*) in August 1906 and the ensuing period of free expression brought forth a great upsurge in newspaper publishing (Browne, *Press and Poetry*, pp. ix-xi; see vi, above). Most of the poets and writers involved in the constitutional movement were also journalists, which had a profound impact on their work. Poets in particular were no longer dependent on court patronage. Instead of addressing the shah and his entourage, they took the people for their audience, and they had to adjust both their themes and their expression accordingly.

Although prose played a significant role in this period, poetry, because of its unique status in traditional Persian culture, served as the main revolutionary medium. Both educated and illiterate people were accustomed to the recitation of verse, which could, in a few words, summon emotions and

channel them in desired directions. The changes that emerged, though important, did not constitute a deliberate break from classical norms. The main body of constitutional poetry remained hortatory in tone (Browne, *Press and Poetry*, pp. 167-308); content, language, and form were, however, primarily determined by the immediacy of the poet's journalistic activity and the urgency of his goals.

The primary innovation in constitutional poetry was in fact thematic. The classical taboo on so-called "nonpoetic" themes had been lifted, and the poet was free to treat any subject relevant to the advancement of constitutionalism. The main themes chosen were thus criticism of the Persian ruling class and the prevailing social, economic, and political order; praise of democracy and defense of civil and human rights; solidarity with the masses and socialist ideas; anticlerical and antireligious sentiments; attitudes both favorable and hostile to Islam; xenophobic feelings, especially against Arabs and Turks, who were blamed for the backwardness of Persia; glorification of pre-Islamic Persia; anti-imperialism focused on Russia and Great Britain; admiration of Germany; the need for modernization, with emphasis on modern education; and the status of women, especially as related to education and the wearing of the veil (Esḥāq, 1943, pp. 115-75). Concomitant changes occurred in the language. The traditional distinction between poetic and "nonpoetic" vocabulary was discarded, and any variety of the Persian language could be employed to bring the message to the reader.

Classical forms were preserved, however. Some particularly rigid forms like the panegyric *qaṣīda*, with its often bombastic style, lost favor to the more flexible *mosammaṭ* and *mostazād*, but the freer *ḡazal* and *maṯnawī* remained popular. Poets like Adīb-al-Mamālek Farāhānī and Moḥammad-Taqī Bahār continued to write *qaṣīda*s on nontopical themes, though national heroes and glories of the past were celebrated, rather than the shah and the aristocracy. In contrast, the more lyrical *ḡazal*, which dealt with subjects and emotions that could be universally appreciated, owed its popularity partly to the language, which, though often highly symbolic, could be enjoyed at different levels, even by the illiterate. In the constitutional *ḡazal* the "motherland" replaced the traditional beloved, and it was her agonies, and national feelings in general, that provided the emotional impact. The suitability of the *ḡazal* for musical performance enhanced its popularity still further (see, e.g., works by ʿĀref, Bahār, and Farroḵī, in Āryanpūr, II, pp. 146-51; Soroudi, 1979, pp. 243-44). But it was the didactic *maṯnawī*, flexible in

form and simple in language, that was most vital in this period. The characteristic use of everyday idiom and reliance on folk tales and customs were further developed in the constitutional *maṯnawī*, of which the most skilled master was Īraj Mīrzā Jalāl-al-Mamālek (1291-1344/1874-1926). Some poets went a step further and wrote satirical poems entirely in colloquial language (see, e.g., poems by Dehḵodā, Ašraf Gīlānī, and Bahār in Āryanpūr, II, pp. 92-94; Soroudi, 1979, pp. 29, 35). Many words and expressions were borrowed from European languages (particularly French), either directly or in translation, for example, *pārlemān* (Fr. *parlement*), *kābena* (*cabinet*), *komīta* (*comité*), *komīsīūn* (*commission*), *pārtī* (*parti*), *porogrām* (*programme*; Esḥāq, 1943, pp. 46-61). The rhetorical devices used, on the other hand, were generally taken from the traditional stock. Even images and similes coined to describe the social and political atmosphere of the time were largely based on those of classical poetry.

Except for a single experiment in writing syllabic poems (Rahman, pp. 88-89), there was no deliberate attempt to introduce new metric systems. The Arabo-Persian quantitative *ʿarūż* was generally preserved. In hortatory poems there was a tendency toward shorter lines and lighter meters, which were more suited to simpler language and musical requirements. Constitutional poetry was influenced by folk verse mainly through the *taṣnīf*, a strophic form, frequently with a refrain and meant to be sung. Before the constitutional period this form had been scorned by the educated elite, but, owing to the moving songs composed in this genre and performed by Mīrzā Abu'l-Qāsem ʿĀref Qazvīnī (Āryanpūr, II, pp. 146-68), it developed into a recognized literary form. Various lyrical, social, and political themes were treated in the constitutional *taṣnīf*. Satirical poems, frequently modeled on folk verses, provided important vehicles for criticism of the political and religious establishment, social and cultural practices perceived as negative, and the like. In both prose and poetry satire was also influenced by the Turkish newspaper *Mollā Naṣr-al-Dīn*, published in Tiflis, and its chief contributor, the poet Mīrzā ʿAlī-Akbar Ṭāherzāda Ṣāber (Āryanpūr, II, pp. 36-46). Another folk genre was the lullaby, which was adapted to lament the disquieting conditions of the era (Āryanpūr, II, pp. 171-72). Some examples of popular religious lamentations (*nawḥa-ye sīna-zanī*) and parodies of classical poems are also to be found in constitutional poetry (Klyashtorina). Additional metric variations, *zeḥāf*, were introduced through melodies imposed from folk (*taṣnīf*) and popular (*nawḥa*) poems. The influence of music resulted in one novelty that had not been admissible in classical poetry (except for *mostazād*): lines of different metric

lengths and different meters in different parts of the poem (Aḵawān-e Ṭāleṭ, pp. 161-65; Esḥāq, 1943, pp. 87-90).

Another source of constitutional poetry was ancient Iranian myth and legend, which in classical poetry had been to some degree subordinated to Islamic and biblical themes mediated through the Qurʾān and other religious works. Iranian myths were predominant in some works by Mīrzā Ebrāhīm Khan Pūr(-e) Dāwūd and Moḥammad-Reżā ʿEšqī (1312-42/1893-1924; see Āryanpūr, II, pp. 368-75; Soroudi, 1979, pp. 263-67), though in poems by Bahār and ʿĀref they were sometimes combined with Semitic myths, mediated through the Qurʾān and other religious sources. Another way of expressing nationalist sentiments was to write in pure Persian language (*pārsī-e sara*), without foreign loanwords. This tendency found limited expression in the works of Pūr-Dāwūd and Adīb-al-Mamālek (Esḥāq, 1943, pp. 40-45), who followed the prose works of the 19th-century poet Mīrzā Abu'l-Ḥasan Yaḡmā.

*Postconstitutional period.* The expiration of the Majles term in 1329/1911 and the failure to hold immediate elections represented a serious setback to the constitutional movement. It was reflected in a decline in militancy, and poets began to shift their emphasis from content to form. Reformist and even radical tendencies in the social and political spheres had not produced a new literary vision. Poets had for the most part followed formal tradition, unable to free themselves from the authority of the classical masters (Soroudi, 1979, pp. 11-12). Those who considered themselves modernists (*motajadded*) had largely confined themselves to tinkering with classical forms (Rahman, pp. 91-108) and introducing new subjects and new vocabulary.

Development of a genuinely new literary vision had to await a group of younger poets, who had grown up during the period of the constitutional movement. They did not have strong classical training but were more familiar with and influenced by European literature. Unlike the older generation, they demanded thorough and drastic literary reforms, a new poetry that would reflect their time not only in subject matter but also in tempo, form, and style. Their attacks on classical literature, which became particularly vigorous in some newspapers after World War I, generated a controversy between "the old and the new" (Āryanpūr, II, pp. 436-66; Soroudi, 1974).

The first signs of change could be observed in the works of ʿEšqī, who was both a political and a literary radical. His formal innovations, though minor and hesitant, heralded the first conscious break with classical norms. It was he

who first broke the classical rules that hemistiches had to be of equal length and that each strophe had to have the same number of lines, instead permitting the necessities of subject matter and the mode of expression to determine these matters. He was more successful in his expressive manipulation of language, however. Under French literary influence and in tune with the poetic tendencies of his friend ʿAlī Esfandīārī (known as Nīmā Yūšīj), he broke away from the formal imagery of classical poetry. His poem "Īdeʾāl" (1342=1301 Š./1923) was based on personal sensibility and experience, and his imagery was mediated through his own vision, rather than those of the classical masters (Āryanpūr, II, pp. 361-80; Machalski, 1959). ʿEšqī was also the author of the first original musical play of the postconstitutional period, *Rastāḵīz-e šahrīārān-e Īrān* (Resurrection of the Persian kings); he called it the first Persian opera (Āryanpūr, II, pp. 372-75).

The real innovations in literary form under the impact of the constitutional movement occurred in the works of Nīmā Yūšīj (1274-1379=1338 Š./1895-1959). Nīma retained the classical quantitative meters but freed himself from preimposed classical patterns and lines of equal length, creating a "free verse" in which the poem was shaped organically according to internal requirements (Aḵawān-e Ṯāleṯ, pp. 61-207; Āryanpūr, II, pp. 466-80). The publication in 1300 Š./1921 of his long poem "Afsāna," considered the turning point in the transition from classical to modern poetry, coincided with publication of the first collection of modern Persian short stories (see below).

Constitutional prose

*Preconstitutional period.* At the beginning of the 19th century elevated Persian prose was ornate and abstruse, as yet unaffected by the revivalist movement that dominated poetry. Simpler styles could be found in some religious tracts and in popular literature. The first reforms in language, tending toward simplification, were introduced in the official correspondence of the grand viziers Qāʾem-maqām (d. 1251/1835) and Amīr(-e) Kabīr (d. 1268/1852) and were cultivated by the rising Qajar bureaucracy. The introduction of printing in 1233/1816-17 (Āryanpūr, I, pp. 228-34), by making books more readily available, also encouraged a simpler and more direct mode of expression. Such innovations contributed to the intellectual ferment stimulated by unorthodox religious movements like Shaikhism and Babism and contact with the West. The main media for the introduction of modern ideas and the development of modernist prose were original works of nonfiction and imaginative literature, translations, and newspapers (see vi, above).

The pioneers of literary reform and criticism shared a marginal social position. They belonged to religious or ethnic minorities or lived outside the boundaries of Persia, sometimes in voluntary exile. Mīrzā Malkom Khan (1249-1326/1833-1908), of Armenian descent, was probably the first to publish reformist tracts written in a straightforward style and with new terms and expressions that he coined for the introduction of Western ideas, especially state reform (Āryanpūr, I, pp. 314-22; Kamshad, pp. 14-16). ʿAbd-al-Raḥīm Ṭālebūf (Talebov; 1250-1328/1855-1910), though he lived in Tiflis, had been born in Tabrīz and wrote in Persian. In simple, often didactic language he introduced modern scientific and other concepts like freedom, civil rights, and the like (Āryanpūr, I, pp. 287-303; Kamshad, p. 16). Mīrzā Āqā Khan Kermānī (1270-1314/1853-96) was one of the first to criticize classical literature and to propound a "useful" literature written in a less ornate language that would help to educate the Persian people (pp. 5-9; Āryanpūr, I, pp. 390-93). The author of what is often considered the first work of modern fiction in Persian was also an expatriate. Ḥājj Zayn-al-ʿĀbedīn Marāḡaʾī was a Persian merchant who lived successively in the Caucasus, the Crimea, and Istanbul. The first and most important volume of his trilogy *Sīāḥat-nāma-ye Ebrāhīm Bīg* (Travel book of Ebrāhīm Beg) was published at an indeterminate date toward the end of the 19th century. In the story the protagonist, a man of Persian parentage, arrives in Persia for the first time and is horrified by the backwardness of the people and the corruption and ineptitude of the government. The book was banned in Persia, but nevertheless its simple prose style and the use of everyday idioms contributed to the development of modern Persian prose (Āryanpūr, I, pp. 304-13; Kamshad, pp. 17-21). The travelogue (*safar-nāma*) became one of the popular genres of the late Qajar period; Persians, including kings and aristocrats, noted their impressions of European societies and compared them with their own. These books were written in various styles, but most of them followed the general trend toward simplicity.

Translations of foreign literature began to appear around the middle of the 19th century, particularly after the establishment of Dār al-fonūn, the first institution of modern education in Persia. The translation of scientific and historical books necessitated a language both precise and concise, but the main effect on Persian literary style came through translated novels and plays. Among early efforts were translations of the plays of Āḵūndzāda (1291/1874) from Turkish. In these works the author criticized various aspects of Muslim societies, using different levels of the spoken language in the original Turkish, a feature that was emulated in the Persian versions. Most literary works,

however, were translated from European languages, mainly French. Among them were works by the elder Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, Molière, Jacques Henri Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, and René de Chateaubriand. These translations were not all of comparable literary value but, under the influence of the originals, tended in general toward more lucid and simpler prose. A particularly popular work was James Morier's *Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, translated by Mīrzā Ḥabīb Eṣfahānī some time toward the end of the 19th century. In the Persian translation, a rather loose rendition of the original, the shortcomings of Persian society were magnified, especially those of the political and religious establishment. Mīrzā Ḥabīb created a new literary style in which felicitous classical phrasing was combined with everyday idioms and expressions (Kamshad, pp. 21-28; Āryanpūr, I, pp. 359-405).

Newspapers published outside Persia were a major force in awakening social and political consciousness on the eve of the constitutional movement. Although newspapers had been published in Persia since 1253/1837, until the constitutional decree they were tightly controlled and devoid of any political significance (Kohan, I, passim). Except for clandestine leaflets (*šab-nāma*), opposition papers were published outside the country and smuggled into Persia, where they were passed surreptitiously from hand to hand. The most prominent among them were *Aḵtar* (Istanbul, 1292-1313/1875-96); *Qānūn* (London, 1890-93), published by Mīrzā Malkom Khan; *Ḥabl al-matīn* (Calcutta, 1311-33/1893-1912); *Ṯorayyā* (Cairo, 13l6-18/1899-1900); and *Parvareš* (Cairo, 1318-19/1900-01). The contributors of articles, which ranged in tone from moderate to fiery, criticized the despotic Persian regime, the wretchedness of the people, religious obscurantism, and the like and tried to educate Persians in social and political activism. In some of these papers reports in simple language were published side by side with editorials in elevated literary style. Others, particularly *Qānūn*, were entirely written in simple style. On the whole, the opposition press seriously altered traditional styles by combining literary and spoken language and introducing many new words and expressions (Āryanpūr, I, pp. 233-52; Kamshad, pp. 29-30).

*The militant phase.* As with poetry, during the period in which constitutional journalism flourished prose writing became closely associated with social and political developments, and journalistic essays became the leading prose genre. Their authors treated basically the same subjects as did the poets (see above), focusing particularly on the despotic regime, its consequences for Persia and Persians through the ages, and ways of curbing it; the need for

modernization in every aspect of society, frequently expressed in terms of bedazzled admiration of Western civilization and denigration of Muslim and Persian traditions; the responsibility of the clergy as a whole for Persian backwardness, coupled with awareness of the strong hold of religion and religious leaders on the masses; and attempts to introduce modern ideas in religious garb. The most important and influential newspapers of the period were *Ṣūr-e Esrāfīl*, *Nasīm-e šemāl*, *Now-bahār*, *al-Jamāl*, *Ḥabl al-matīn* (Tehran), *Rūḥ al-qodos*, *Mosāwāt*, and later *Ṭūfān* and *Qarn-e bīstom* (Āryanpūr, II; pp. 20-28; Soroudi, 1988).

From a stylistic point of view the simplifying trends that had developed in 19th-century prose reached a culmination in this period. Most constitutional writers came from the middle and lower classes. The most prominent, some of whom were also poets, included ʿAlī-Akbar Dehḵodā (1258-1334 Š./1879-1956), Mīrzā Jahāngīr Khan Šīrāzī (1292-1326/1875-1908), Bahār, Solṭān-al-ʿOlamāʾ Ḵorāsānī (d. 1326/1908), Moḥammad Farroḵī (1306-58=1318 Š./1889-1939), and ʿEšqī. They developed new styles based on varying combinations of the simpler classical traditions, colloquial language, and European influences. A common characteristic of the constitutional style was the short, straightforward sentence, free from inappropriate synonyms, metaphors, and allusions (Bahār, *Sabk-šenāsī* III, pp. 401-07).

Beside hortatory and analytical essays, social and political satire became a major literary genre. The most accomplished satirist was Dehḵodā, whose column "Čarand parand" in *Ṣūr-e Esrāfīl* was among the most widely read of the time. He adopted colloquial language and storytelling techniques and thus helped to lay the foundations upon which modern Persian prose literature developed (Āryanpūr, II, pp. 98-105; Kamshad, pp. 37-40).

Another literary genre introduced in this period was the historical novel, the first published by M.-B. Ḵosravī in 1327/1909. These works provided a means of escape from a sense of national impotence in the face of foreign intervention and were aimed at restoring Persian self-confidence through the renewal of ancient splendor. The protagonists of most were powerful national heroes, especially those of the pre-Islamic past. Examples include *Ešg wa salṭanat* (Love and sovereignty), on the conquests of Cyrus the Great, published by Mūsā Naṯrī in 1337/1919; *Dāstān-e bāstān* (A story of ancient times), on the rise of the Achaemenids and the love story of Bīžan and Manīža, published by Mīrzā Ḥasan Khan Badīʿ in 1338/1920; and *Dāmgostarān yā enteqām-ḵᵛāhān-e Mazdak* (Trap setters, or The avengers of Mazdak), on the

reasons for the fall of the Sasanians and the Arab conquest, published by Ṣaṇʿatīzāda Kermānī in 1339/1921. These novels differed in historical accuracy, style, and literary value but formed an important link in the development in Persia of the novel in the European sense (Āryanpūr, II, pp. 238-58; Kamshad, pp. 41-53; Nikitine, pp. 297-336).

Theater groups had begun to present plays in Persia on the eve of the Constitutional Revolution, but dramatic writing during most of the period under discussion was limited mainly to translations or adaptations of foreign plays.

*Postconstitutional period.* Toward the end of this period Aḥmad Maḥmūdī and Ḥasan Moqaddam (ʿAlī Nowrūz) began to write original plays of literary or dramatic value (Āryanpūr, I, pp. 342-66, II, pp. 288-315). Prose writers in general were less inhibited in introducing new forms and modes of expression than the poets, because Persian classical prose had never enjoyed the high esteem of poetry. Whereas poets frequently stumbled over classical obstacles on the way to a modern poetics, prose writers followed a smoother path in a parallel direction. The thematic, stylistic, and formal modifications introduced gradually over several decades crystallized in the first collection of modern Persian short stories, published by Moḥammad-ʿAlī Jamālzāda in 1300 Š./1921, with an introductory literary manifesto. It marked the beginning of the modern phase of Persian prose literature (Kamshad, pp. 90-113).

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