



## EROTIC LITERATURE

---

**EROTIC LITERATURE**, expressed in Persian by the neologism *adabīyāt-e erotīk*, is not a clearly defined genre since the concept of what is “erotic” varies considerably from time to time and place to place. In general, it may be regarded as encompassing a variety of works in prose and poetry dealing with human love relationships, *‘ešq*, most particularly in their physical aspects.

In this regard, Persian love literature could be divided into four categories. First, there is true romantic literature as represented by Nezāmī’s poem *Laylī o Majnūn*, in which love is exclusively spiritual or psychological, with little importance attached to physical union. Then there is the variety represented by the story *Vīs o Rāmīn*, in which love consists of an inseparable admixture of the two elements of *maḥabbat* (love, affection, fondness), which is to say spiritual or platonic love, and physical love (*hamk<sup>v</sup>ābgī*, literally “sleeping together”). Beyond that, love literature reaches *hazl* (jocularly, joking), which involves description of sexual particulars, vulgarities or obscenities, and in which the element of humor and sometimes instruction replaces *maḥabbat* (see *hazl*). Finally comes pornography, which consists of lascivious stories and descriptions and often graphic illustrations for the purpose of stimulating sexual arousal or teaching methods of sexual activity (such as the anonymous *Laddat al-nesā’*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, suppl. Persan 328 or the *Alfiya wa šalfiya* by Azraqī Heravī, q.v.). This article attempts to deal only with some examples of non-pornographic literary erotica in Persian involving depictions and descriptions of embracing, wooing, and physical beauty with adorned language. Because this aesthetic erotica aims more at effecting literary



pleasure than sexual stimulation, it either does not focus on particulars of sexual activity or treats sexuality deriving from love very briefly and in metaphorical language.

For such aesthetic erotica, a special term does not exist in the Persian language. But the phrase *būs o kenār*, literally meaning kissing and embracing, is close to the desired denotation. Ferdowsī uses this expression once in the *Šāh-nāma* (ed. Khaleghi, I, p. 200 v. 540), meaning by it embracing without sexual intercourse. Likewise Īrānšāh b. Abi'l-Ḳayr uses the expression once in the *Bahman-nāma* (q.v) with this meaning (p. 40 v. 396), probably influenced by the *Šāh-nāma*. But from the use of the expression—sometimes transposed to *kenār o būs* because of exigencies of meter or rhyme—in the works of other poets (Dehḳodā, s.v. *būs*), it appears that in *būs o kenār* sexual intercourse is not definitely excluded. Nevertheless, the expression connotes an emphasis on embracing (*hamāgūšī*) and wooing (*moḡāzala*) and not sexual intercourse, for which reason if the act of sexual intercourse figures in *būs o kenār*, it is not given emphasis or is only implied. Thus *būs o kenār* is the Persian term closest in meaning to the aesthetic erotica which this article treats.

Instances of such aesthetic erotica appear in such various forms of Persian poetry as romance, *qaṣīda*, *ḡazal*, *robāī* and folk quatrains, and also in prose works. In romances, the most beautiful example of this sort of erotica is found in *Vis o Rāmīn* by Faḳr-al-Dīn Gorgānī (e.g., pp. 228 vv. 182 ff., 284 vv. 83 ff.) and then *Ḳosrow o Šīrīn* by Neḡāmī (e.g., pp. 144 vv. 59 ff., 235 vv. 30 ff.). Thereafter several notable instances occur in *Farḡād-nāma* by 'Āref Ardabilī (8th/14th cent; e.g., vv. 4006 ff.), in *Dāstān-e Padmāvāt* (comp. 1028/1619) by Mollā 'Abd-al-Šakūr Bazmī (pp. 162-65), and in *Zohra wa Manūčehr* by Īraj Mīrzā (1874-1926; p. 100 vv. 595 ff.). Aside from these examples, erotic descriptions in romances are usually a matter of one-directional desire of a man for a woman, usually couched in abundant metaphors and other rhetorical devices. A prime example of these stylized erotic descriptions appears in the poem *Gol o nowrūz* by Ḳvājū Kermanī (p. 237 vv. 4 ff.). A notable instance in the *qaṣīda* is a description by a poet named Abu'l-Moḡāmed Maḡmūd (5th/11th cent.), also known as Jawhar Zargar, which Sa'īd Nafīsī cited in his introduction to *Dīvān-e 'Am'aq* (pp. 65 ff.). In all likelihood, such erotic descriptions also existed in the *qaṣīdas* of Rūdakī, but unfortunately only scattered verses have survived (e.g., *Dīvān*, pp. 509 vv. 458-59, 499 vv. 202-204). As for erotic descriptions in the *ḡazal*, a particularly fine example appears in a *ḡazal* by Sa'dī which begins “*emšab magar be-waqt namīk'vānad īn*



*korūs*” (This cock seems to be cowing at the wrong time tonight; Sa’dī, p. 98 in the “Ṭayyebāt” section); and a second appears in a *gāzal* by Mīrzā Ḥabīb Ḳorāsānī which begins “*Če koš bovad ka šab-ī dar kenār-e man košbī*” (How nice would it be if you sleep with me one night; p. 214). Persian quatrains likewise exhibit examples of erotic descriptions, among them several by Mehsatī Ganjavī (*Dīvān*, nos. 3, 145, 187, 255). Beautiful erotic descriptions can also be found in traditional folk poetry (e.g., Kūhī Kermānī, pp. 31, 42, 76, 98, 133, 141).

Contemporary Persian literature is also not lacking in erotic descriptions, notable examples appearing in the poems of Forūḡ Farroḳzād, such as her short lyric called “*Ābtanī*” (pp. 87-88) and in the poems of Sīmīn Behbahānī, such as her *gāzal* called “*šab-ī hamrahat goḍar*” (p. 27; for examples of aesthetic erotica in both classical and contemporary poetry, see Ḳāleqī Moṭlaq, 1996, pp. 15-54). In contrast with poetry, contemporary Persian fiction is lacking in noteworthy erotic descriptions.

Erotic descriptions do not always involve aspects of wooing and love-making. Sometimes they deal simply with description of the beauty of the human, and most typically the female, body. The oldest examples of this sort of erotic description appear in the Avesta. One is the description of Anāhitā in *Yašt* 5 (7, 15, 64, 78, 126), and another is the description of Daēnā (see DĒN) in *Hadōxt Nask* (2.9 ; see Hertel, pp. 71 ff., 94). There Daēnā and especially Anāhitā (see ANĀHĪD) are described as tall and powerful women with prominent breasts, white arms, stylishly dressed, well made up, and bejeweled. Another interesting description of ideal beauty in a woman appears in a treatise in the Pahlavi language attributed to the time of Ḳosrow I (531-78). In this treatise Ḳosrow tests a young man who is supposed to join the cavalry by asking him thirteen questions about sports, games, music, food, beverages, clothing, flowers, and the like. His twelfth question is about a woman who would be acceptable in terms of morals and beauty. In answer to Ḳosrow’s question as to “which woman is the best,” the young man says: “May you be immortal! That woman is the best who in her mind loves her husband and is of great intelligence, whose stature is middle-sized and whose chest is broad and whose head, buttocks, and neck are well-formed and whose legs are short and waist slender and soles of the feet arched and whose fingers are long and whose limbs are soft, smooth, and fleshy (lit. filled) and whose breast is quince-like and whose body down to the toes is snowy-white and whose cheeks are pomegranate-red and whose eyes are almond-shaped and lips



coral-like and eye-brows vaulted and whose denture is white, fresh, and brilliant and locks black and bright and long, and who has soothing words in bed for her husband but does not talk indecently” (Monchi-zadeh, p. 82).

Ta‘ālebī (*Ghorar*, pp. 710 ff.) quotes the contents of this treatise including the above description, but attributes its authorship to the time of Ҷosrow II (590-628). Ṭabarī (I, p. 1026, cf. Bal‘amī, ed. Bahār, p. 1108 ff) has also preserved a description of ideal beauty in a woman, which he attributes to the time of Ҷosrow I Anōšīravān. Bal‘amī’s Persian version of this text reads: “A well-formed maiden should have the right height, neither tall nor short; a fair complexion, white behind the ears, her whole body white down to her toenails, the whiteness of her cheeks tinged with red, rivalling the light of the moon and sun; her eyebrows arched like bows with a space between them; large eyes with the blackness of the pupils in contrast to their whiteness; long, beautiful black eyelashes; a long, narrow nose; a face neither too long nor too round; long, beautiful black hair; her head medium-sized neither large nor small; her neck not long and not so short that her earrings would touch her shoulders; her chest broad and the breasts small, round and firm; her shoulders and upper arms proportionate; her wrist plump and her fingers slender, neither long nor short; her stomach flat, her buttocks prominent; her waist and the place a necklace fits around her neck slender; her thighs plump and full; her knees round; her calves stout; her heels and toes small and round; her gait languid due to plumpness. . .”

Several instances of such descriptions occur also in *Samak-e ‘Ayyār*, one of them being: “The prince looked at that person and saw a girl [more beautiful than] a hundred thousand idols—round head and wide brow; hair like a noose; eyebrows like a bow of Čāč [Tashkent]; eyes like two narcissus; eyelashes like Āraš’s arrow; a nose like sword; a mouth as tiny as half a gold coin; a face like silver; cheeks like a rose; round dimples deep as a well; a short neck with many folds and a double chin; a chest like a silver throne; breasts like pomegranates; short forearms; tiny hands with a hundred dimples, and darkened nails, and a pair of rings on each finger; a stomach like a pastry made of finest flour and kneaded with almond oil; a navel like a little vial of precious perfume; thighs like a camel; and calves like two ivory columns. She was dressed in a robe of the whitest silk; with similar cloth covering her legs; a fine muslin veil over her head; a scarf around her cheeks and neck with amulets of white and black ambergris, the fragrance of which spread every where.” (*Samak-e ‘ayyār*, I, pp. 13 ff; see also I, pp. 922 ff., II, p. 117 ff.).



Descriptions of ideal female beauty likewise appear in Persian poetry, for example the description of Rūdāba in the *Šāh-nāma* (I, p. 183 and 193). A comparison of the foregoing examples with one another suggests that Persian taste concerning the ideal of female beauty has remained essentially unchanged at least since the time of the Sasanians. Only in Persian poetry, however, has the height of the woman, in line with ancient taste as documented in the Avesta, been described as tall, rather than average as in the prose passages (for further discussion, see Kāleqī-Moṭṭāq, 1997).

There is also a short treatise called *Anīs al-’oššāq* which the poet Šaraf-al-Dīn Rāmī (8th/14th century) wrote in nineteen chapters on the terminology used for describing a woman’s face and body in Persian poetry, beginning with descriptions of hair and ending with calves.

Erotic descriptions in Persian literary culture are not limited to human love relationships. They also involve such other elements in nature as animals and birds, plants and flowers, the wind, water, night and day, the sun and the moon, and the stars. In particular Nāhīd/Zohra make love with Bahrām/Merrīk, stories probably inspired by Roman legends of Venus and Mars, which in turn were inspired by Greek myths of Aphrodite and Ares (see Kāleqī Moṭṭāq, 1996, pp. 24-25).

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

‘Am‘aq Boḳārī, *Dīvān*, ed. S. Nafisī, Tehran, 1339 Š./1960.

‘Āref Ardabīlī, *Farhād-nāma*, ed. ‘A. Āḍar, Tehran, 2535 = 1355 Š./1976.

Mollā ‘Abd-al-Šakūr Bazmī Gojrātī, *Dāstān-e Padmāvat*, ed. A. Ḥ. ‘Ābedī, Tehran, 1350 Š./1971.

S. Behbahānī, *K’’ aṭṭ-ī ze sor‘at wa az ātaš*, Tehran, 1360 Š./1981.

Faḳr-al-Dīn As‘ad Gorgānī, *Vīs o Rāmīn*, ed. M. A. Todua and A. A. Gwakharia, Tehran, 1349 Š./1970.



Farāmarz b. Qodādād Arrajānī, *Samak-e 'ayyār* I, ed. P. Nātel Kānlarī, 3rd ed., Tehran, 1348 Š./1969.

F. Farroqzād, *Bargozīda-ye aš'ār*, 4th repr., Tehran, 1355 Š./1976.

Ḥājj Mīrzā Ḥabīb Qorāsānī, *Dīvān*, ed. 'A. Ḥabīb, 3rd ed., Tehran, 1313 Š./1934.

J. Hertel, *Beiträge zur Metrik des Awestas und des Rigvedas*, Leipzig, 1927.

Īraj Mīrzā, *Dīvān*, ed. M.-J. Maḥjūb, 5th ed., Los Angeles, 1365 Š./1986.

Īrānšāh b. Abi'l-Qayr, *Bahman-nāma*, ed. R. 'Afifī, Tehran, 1370 Š./1991.

Qvājū Kermānī, *Gol o Nowrūz*, ed. K. 'Aynī, Tehran, 1350 Š./1971.

J. Kāleqī-Moṭlaq, "Tan-kāma-sarā'ī dar adab-e fārsī," *Īrān-šenāsī* 8/1, 1996, pp. 15-54.

Idem, "Zībā'ī-e kamāl-e maṭlūb dar zan dar farhang-e Īrān," *Īrān-šenāsī* 8/4, 1997, pp. 703-16.

Ḥ. Kūhī Kermānī, *Haftšad tarāna*, Tehran, 1327 Š./1948.

F. Meier, *Die schöne Mahsati*, Wiesbaden, 1963.

D. Monchi-zadeh, ed. and tr. "Xusrōv ut Rētak" in *Monumentum Georg Morgenstierne* II, *Acta Iranica* 22, Tehran, Leiden, pp. 47-91.

S. Nafīsī, *Mohīṭ-e zendagī wa aḥwāl wa aš'ār-e Rūdakī*, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1341 Š./1962.

Nezāmī Ganjavī, *Kosrow o Šīrīn*, ed. L. Taqurof, Baku, 1960.

Sa'dī, *Kollīyāt*, ed. 'A. Eqbāl Āštīānī, Tehran, 1317 Š./1938.

Šaraf-al-Dīn Rāmī, *Anīs al-oššāq*, ed. 'A. Eqbāl Āštīānī, Tehran, 1325 Š./1946.