



FATALISM

FATALISM in the Islamic Period. The concept of fatalism as commonly used in Islamic philosophy and Persian literature denotes the belief in the pre-ordained Decree of God (*qazā wa qadar*), according to which whatever happens to human beings or in the whole universe has been pre-determined by the will and knowledge of the Almighty, and that no changes or transformations in it can be made through the agency of the human will. The advocates of these tenets claim support for their views in the Koranic references to “The Tablet” (*lawḥ*) and “The Pen” (*qalam*; Qur’ān 68:1, 85:22) and maintain that whatever happens in the world has been written down by God with the Pen of the Divine Will (*qalam-e mašīyat*) on the Tablet of the Eternal Decree (*lawḥ-e qazā*). The Tablet of the Eternal Decree, being “safely preserved” (*maḥfūz*, Qur’ān 85:22), is immutable. Moreover, once the Pen of the Divine Will had written down the decrees on the Tablet, it dried up. What has been set down cannot therefore be altered. The prophetic Hadith referring to the drying up of the pen (*jaff al-qalam*) is mentioned in Persian poetry, including the *Maṭnawī* (Forūzānfar, p. 38).

Thus human destiny is pre-determined and whatever happens in the world follows a pre-ordained course which cannot be altered except by the will of God (Faḵr al-Dīn Rāzī, XXX, p. 78, XXXI, p. 129; Meybodī, X, pp. 186-87, p. 446). This belief, couched in a variety of ways, is reflected in many aspects of Persian culture including literature, mystical writings, folklore, and popular expressions. The reliance on auguries, religious vows and pledges and supplicatory gifts, can be regarded as strategies for ameliorating the inherent



harshness of such beliefs and the paralyzing effect they can inflict on human endeavor, making any effort or struggle appear futile and worthless.

The belief in pre-destination appears in the very first examples of Persian prose and poetry after the rise of Islam. For example, references to fate, using terms such as *lawḥ* and *kār-e qazā* (the work of destiny) occur in the two short pieces of poetry by Moḥammad b. Waṣīf, a secretary to the Saffarid ruler Ya‘qūb b. Layṭ (d. 265/879; *Tārīḵ-e Sīstān*, pp. 210, 260). These views are echoed in Persian poetry from the Samanid and Saljuq period to the present. For example, there are frequent references to fate by different poets in ‘Awfī’s anthology, *Lobāb al-albāb*, including the following: Kōsravī Saraḵsī (ed. Nafīsī, p. 257), Abū Šakūr Balkī (p. 259), Ma‘nawī Boḵārāī (p. 261), ‘Onṣorī (p. 268) and Manšūrī Samarqandī (p. 281).

Fate plays a dominant part in both Ferdowsī’s *Šāh-nāma* and Faḵr-al-Dīn Gorgānī’s *Vīs o Rāmīn* (Ringgren, 1952). In *Vīs o Rāmīn*, for example, the dominance of fate (*qazā*) is underlined from the outset, and the future destiny of the lovers is sealed even before they are born (Gorgānī, p. 30). In the *Šāh-nāma* the course of the life of the epic heroes and their quarrels and conflicts are repeatedly described as part of an inevitable and fixed pattern of events that shape their future (*būdanī, būdanī kār*). The way Zāḥḥāk, Zāl, Sīavoš, or Forūd meet their end, or the tragedy of Sohrāb, exemplify the workings of this notion in the *Šāh-nāma*. The presence of fatalistic notions in the poetry of other great poets including Kayyām, Sa‘dī, and Ḥāfez is well-attested. As a result, they have been condemned by some 19th and 20th century intellectuals—most vociferously by Aḥmad Kasrawī—for contributing to the supposed backwardness and lethargy of the nation by propagating fatalistic beliefs and belittling human endeavor. But in spite of these modern strictures, the same themes can be detected in poetry of late 19th and 20th century poets like Adīb Nišābūrī, Malek-al-Šo‘arā’ Bahār, and Parvīn E‘tešāmī (qq.v.), illustrating the perennial influence of this mode of thought throughout all periods of Persian literary history.

Early Persian prose, particularly the historical chronicles, also contain the same fatalistic ideas and terminology. For example, the Ghaznavid chronicle *Zayn al-akbār* quotes the Samanid ruler Aḥmad b. Esmā‘īl (d. 301/914) referring to the Heavenly Will (*taqdīr-e āsmānī*) in his supplications to God (Gardīzī, ed. Ḥabībī, p. 150) and the *Tārīḵ-e Bal‘amī* (ed. Bahār, pp. 29-30) explicates the notion that all happenings until the Day of Judgment have already been inscribed on the Tablet (*lawḥ*) by the Pen (*qalam*).



The most frequently used phrase to describe pre-ordained fate and hence fatalism is *qazāwa qadar*. Both *qazā* and *qadar* occur in the Qur'ān (Ringgren 1955, pp. 97-104) but they contain different shades of meaning there depending on the context. However, both in popular culture and in the debates between the theologians of different schools, the semantic range of the two words was reduced and their combined use as *qazāwa qadar* became the usual term for fatalism and pre-destination (Gardet, pp. 366-67; Nallino II, pp. 176-80). Relatively early examples can be cited from Persian poetry (Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, pp. 7, 499).

This shared usage of terminology for fate and pre-destination in both learned and popular Islamic literature brought its own different nuances and classifications. The intricate debates on the theological niceties of pre-destination that one meets in debates within different religious schools (Faḳr al-Dīn Rāzī, XXIX, p. 73; Ritter, 1933) have little in common with the way concepts of fate appear in works of most poets and in everyday usage and vocabulary. In the popular idiom, *qazāwa qadar* is used to describe how life and death and one's share in worldly goods have all been irrevocably decreed by the Almighty, Who will not change anything hereinafter (Nasafī, p. 213).

What is also of significance concerning notions of fate and in the context of folklore and popular religion is the vast repertoire of metaphorical expressions, idiomatic phrases, and personifications of fate in the Persian language, attesting to a long history of belief in fatalism in the cultural history of Persia. They include such expressions as: *tīr-e qazā* (the arrow of destiny); *dast-e qazā*, *dast-e taqdīr* (the hand of fate); *dīvān-e qazā*, *dīvān-e qesmat* (the register of destiny); *ḥokm-e qazā*, *ḥokm-e taqdīr* (the judgment or sentence of destiny); *lawḥ-e qazā*, *lawḥ-e taqdīr* (the tablet of fate); *kelk-e qazā*, *kelk-e taqdīr* (the pen of destiny); *naqš-e qazā*, *naqš-e qadar*, *naqš-e taqdīr* (the role of destiny); and phrases using other terms related to fate such as the following synonyms for "ill-starred" or "ill-fated": *ṭāle'-e vārūn*, *bad-aḳtar*, *naḥs-falak*, *bakt-e bad*, or *sīāh-gelīm*.

In popular proverbs and anecdotes and exempla scattered in the literature of different periods there are numerous references to fate and its machinations (s.v. *qazā* in Dehḳodā, II, pp. 1161-62). The works of both Ḥāfeẓ and Sa'dī are particularly full of allusions to destiny (e.g., Sa'dī, pp. 41, 443). Some literary allusions to fate in Persian literature suggest possible lines of inquiry into comparative mythology. For example, in a verse attributed to Ḥāfeẓ (s.v. *gelīm-e bakt*, Dehḳodā, III, p. 1322) the image of fate being woven is suggestive of



similar images of weaving and spinning in myths of fate (*moira*) in Greek mythology. Similarly, the expression *farmān-e qazā* (the decree of fate) with its implication of fate as an independent sovereign force is also reminiscent of the tension between fate and the deities in other popular religions (Hornblower and Spawforth, pp. 589-90).

The influence of fatalism, combined with the belief in the omnipotence of the Almighty, can also be detected in everyday rules of conduct. The practice of *estetnā*, i.e. always insisting on saying *en šā'a Allāh* “if God wills it” or “God willing” when expressing an intention to do something, was particularly important among Sufis, and there are several references to it in prose and poetry (Gazālī, I, pp.121-25; Daylamī, p. 278; Rūmī, I, v. 8-9).

In stories and legends about legendary and semi-legendary heroes like Cyrus, Zāl, Abraham, and Moses, whether derived from Iranian national history and mythology or popular religious sources such as “The Stories of the Prophets” (*qeşaş al-anbiā'*), fate usually plays a dominant part. It usually shields the hero from potential dangers and calamities so that he can fulfill the destiny bestowed on him by God. Similar themes survive to the present and can even be encountered in accounts of recent monarchs, including Reżā Shah (Bahār, pp. 69-70).

Astrological determinism, i.e., the belief in a pre-determined destiny ruled by the configurations of the planets and the stars which is the basis of astrology has been an extremely influential and tenacious belief in Persia in spite of strong opposition from religious authorities (Ebn Abi'l-Ḥadīd, VI, pp. 200-213). As in the earlier case of general expressions regarding fate, 'Awfi's anthology, *Lobāb al-albāb*, cites many examples of the belief in astral fatalism by early Persian poets, including the following: Abū Zorā'a Mo'ammarī (ed. Nafisī, p. 249); Ḳosravī Saraḳsī (p. 258); 'Ammāra Marvazī (p. 263). Astrological imagery also abounds in the works of such important later poets as Ḳayyām, Anwarī, Ḳāqānī, Ḥāfez,á and Sa'dī.

The history and evolution of astrological theories and Zoroastrian beliefs on fate have been dealt with elsewhere (see [ASTROLOGY AND ASTRONOMY IN IRAN](#), ii. and iii.; [BAḲT](#) i. and ii.). Here, we have been concerned mainly with the more nebulous popular ideas of fate as an inexorable and at times capricious force as reflected in language and literature, while arguments about pre-destination as a religious concept or astrology as a form of scientific or pseudo-scientific determinism are, in a sense, attempts at rationalization of



fate or its reconciliation with human freedom and are discussed elsewhere (see [FREE WILL](#) i. and ii.).

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