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FICTION, II(A)

FICTION

ii(a). HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MODERN FICTION

The long reign of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1848-96) and the Constitutional Revolution a decade after his death witnessed the gradual emergence of modern fiction in Persia. Several social and historical landmarks, most notably in education and journalism, had a direct effect on the development of the new and basically imported literary genres of fiction. The advent of the printing press in the second decade of the nineteenth century; the creation of the Dār al-fonūn (q.v.) in Tehran in l851, offering a modern curriculum taught by Persians and Europeans; the gradual rise in the number of students sent abroad (see EDUCATION xxi) and the concomitant sudden rise in the number of translations, both scientific and literary; and, perhaps most important of all, the increase in the number and range of newspapers (see CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION vi and vii) all had a direct impact on the rise of fiction, affecting, and in a sense creating, its readers, writers, and especially the manner and the matter of its contents.

Alongside these landmarks and partly because of them, there were more nebulous but no less important changes in the way individuals saw themselves and the world about them, exemplified in both the growth of an introspective authorial voice in the narrative on the one hand, and realistic down-to-earth detailed description of everyday life on the other. These new trends heralding a new sensibility can be detected in most genres of prose, including historical

works and travel books. The wry observations of Mīrzā ʿAlī Khan Amīn al-Dawla (q.v.; 1844-1904) in his portrait of Shaikh Jaʿfar Toršīzī, sketched in his account of his pilgrimage to Mecca in l898 (Bahār, pp. 381-83; Āryanpūr, *Az Ṣabā tā Nīmā* I, pp. 276-77) has much in common with similar clerical portraits by Moḥammad ʿAlī Jamālzāda (q.v.; 1895-1997) and Ṣādeq Hedāyat (q.v.; 1903-51) in the next century. In fact, the origins of modern Persian fiction are usually traced by literary historians to a number of politicians and political activists in the 19th century whose primary aims were not to create fictional works but to change what they saw as the perilous state of the country through the use of clear vigorous prose, malleable enough to express and spread notions of reform and the new gospel of modernity as widely as possible. This primarily pedagogic and utilitarian approach towards creating a *littérature engagée* remains dominant to the present day both for writers and critics in Persian.

Most of these early political reformers and activists spent a major part of their lives abroad, writing articles and letters contrasting the dire conditions of Persia with the relative freedom and the rule of law that they witnessed abroad. One of the most famous and controversial of these was Mīrzā Malkom Khan Nāẓem-al-Dawla (1833-1908), noted for his polemical pamphlets such as *Ketābča-ye ḡāybī* (The oracular notebook; l859); the many articles he wrote for his newspaper *Qānūn*;and for his voluminous correspondence with other reformers, including Mīrzā Fatḥ-ʿAlī Āḵūndzāda (q.v., 1812-78). For both of them, reform was an all encompassing matter and included not only law and politics, but also language and literature. They sought the reform of the alphabet (Algar, p. 291) and denounced ornate prose styles for being vacuous and for creating needless barriers to genuine thought and clear thinking (Āryanpūr, *Az Ṣabā tā Nīmā* I, pp. 320-22).

Although writing mostly in Azeri Turkish, Āḵūndzāda had even a greater and more immediate impact on the development of Persian literature and literary criticism (Parsinejad, 1988, pp. 19-36). His blunt *ex cathedra* statements on classics of Persian literature prefigure those of Aḥmad Kasrawī in the next century. He singles out Ferdowsī and Neẓāmī's narratives as the only examples in Persian in which style and content are in unison and hence achieve a measure of verisimilitude (Āḵūndzāda, pp. 31-32); and he deconstructs the different layers of the *Maṯnawī* in a memorably vicious diatribe (ibid., pp. 35-42). The publication in 1874 of the translation of all his plays, together with his short story *Dāstān-e Yūsof Šāh yā setāragān-e farīb*

ḵorda (The tale of King Joseph, or the duped stars), a satirical reconstruction of an episode from Eskandar Beg's *Tārīḵ-e ʿālamārā-ye ʿabbāsī* (I, pp. 473-77), was a landmark in the history of Persian fiction. *Dāstān-e Yūsof Šāh* has been referred to as the first example of Persian fiction proper (Ādamīyat, 1970, pp. 49-53; ʿĀbedīnī, 1987-98, I, pp. 20-21), and the successful use of colloquialisms in the realistic dialogues in this story and in the plays heralded the introduction of unstilted direct speech in Persian fiction.

Too great an emphasis, however, should not be placed on any particular individual with regard to the formation of Persian fiction in this period. It would be more accurate to think in terms of a new climate of opinion where many voices expressed ideas and demands which would have been barely understood half a century earlier. Some of Āḵūndzāda's literary views, for example, are echoed in the works of Mīrzā Āqā Khan Kermānī (q.v.; 1853-54/1896). He, too, dismisses most of classical Persian literature as either sycophantic verbiage or even worse, as a morally corruptive force (Parsinejad, 1990, pp. 541-66). He, too, exempts Ferdowsī from this mass denunciation by pointing out that the only Persian poet praised by European men of letters (*odabāʾ-e farangī*) was Ferdowsī, and that although the *Šāh-nāma* was not altogether devoid of hyperbole, it did instill courage and patriotism (*ḥobb-e mellīyat wa jensīyat*) in Persians (*mardom-e Īrān*) and improve their state of morality (Āryanpūr, *Az Ṣabā tā Nīmā* I, pp. 393-94). All these themes, including nationalism (combined paradoxically with an obsession with what "others," the *farangī*s, think of "us") and the concept of literature and particularly fiction as a weapon for propagating enlightened secular morality, occur repeatedly in the writing and criticism of fiction in Persia over the course of the next century.

The period leading to and including the Persian Constitutional Revolution of l905-11 saw the appearance of major literary landmarks, including *Ketāb-e Aḥmad yā safīna-ye Ṭālebī* (The book of Aḥmad, or Ṭālebī's vessel; 2 vols., Istanbul, 1893-96) and *Masālek al-moḥsenīn* (The ways of the charitable, Cairo, 1323/l905) by ʿAbd-al-Raḥīm Ṭālebof (Talebov; 1834-1911; Yūsofī, pp. 73-107). The very title of the first book is suggestive of its Janus-faced position in fiction: the first part looks forward to later autobiographical novels of moral and educational development, while the second harks back to the classical tradition of poetical anthologies. It attempts to impart knowledge through a conversation with a gifted child (Aḥmad), the information being a patchwork of geography, science, and social criticism (Āryanpūr, *Az Ṣabā tā Nīmā* I, pp.

292-95). His second book, *Masālek al-moḥsenīn*, like *Sīāḥat-nāma-ye Ebrāhīm Beg yā balā-ye taʿaṣṣob-e ū* (The travel diaries of Ebrāhīm Beg, or the pitfalls of his patriotism; Cairo, l895) by Zayn-al-ʿĀbedīn Marāḡaʾī (1837-1910), is a fictional travel narrative in which the anarchic tyranny and backwardness of the country are depicted in an episodic manner (Parsinejad, 1991, pp. 427-40). Although possibly inspired by Sir Humphry Davy's *Consolations in Travel, or the Last Days of a Philosopher* (1830), Ṭalebof's *Masālek al-moḥsenīn* also resembles, in its loose structure filled with incidents of everyday life, the picaresque novels of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century which heralded the rise of modern fiction in Europe.

The nineteenth century in Persia was an age of personal diaries and travelogues, and the above fictional travelogues studied in the context of earlier travel diaries from the somewhat fanciful and mystical *Bostān al-sīāḥa* (q.v.), to the seemingly more matter of fact contemporaneous accounts of daily observations by many Qajar princes and officials, illustrate the changes in the perception of the world in these early days of modern fiction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See below, ii(b).