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FICTION, II(C)

FICTION

ii(c). THE SHORT STORY

Historically, the modern Persian short story has undergone three stages of development: a formative period, a period of consolidation and growth, and a period of diversity.

FORMATIVE PERIOD

The formative period was ushered in by Moḥammad-ʿAlī Jamālzāda's collection *Yak-ī būd yak-ī nabūd* (1921; tr. H. Moayyad and P. Sprachman as *Once Upon a Time*, New York, 1985), and gained momentum with the early short stories of Ṣādeq Hedāyat (1903-51).

Jamālzāda (1895-1997) is usually considered as the first writer of modern short stories in Persian. His stories focus on plot and action rather than on mood or character development, and in that respect are reminiscent of the works of Guy de Maupassant and O. Henry. A typical Jamālzāda short story evolves around some entertaining episode and often has a surprise ending. It has the appeal of traditional Persian folk tales (*qeṣṣa*), which are also plot-centered. The stories from *Yak-ī būd yak-ī nabūd*, which served as a blue-print for his subsequent works, can be defined as anecdotal fiction. Pleasant, entertaining, and glowing with colorful expressions, though lacking in depth and universal significance, these narratives are in essence witty satires about the chaos

reigning in the Persian society of the period, exposing to ridicule its backwardness, bigotry, and superstitions, and usually bearing an implied reformist or didactive message. His characters are often simple, illiterate people—the common folk. The prose is packed, sometimes to excess, with colloquialisms and proverbial expressions, for he was among the first writers to abandon the ornate artificial style of traditional writing and emulate the speech-patterns of ordinary conversations and the language of the folktale. This style had a deep influence on younger writers, making simple colloquial language the norm in modern Persian literature. However, the light-hearted tenor of his anecdotal fiction and the manner in which he constructed his plots found no following among younger writers and had little influence on the development of modern Persian short story.

In contrast, Ṣādeq Hedāyat, the writer who introduced modernism to Persian literature, brought about a fundamental change in Persian fiction. In addition to his longer stories, *Būf-e kūr* (his masterpiece; see above ii.) and *Hājī Āqā* (1945), he wrote collections of short stories including *Seh qaṭra ḵūn* (Three drops of blood, l932; tr. into Frenchby G. Lazard as *Trois gouttes de sang*, Paris l996) and *Zenda ba gūr* (Buried alive, 1930). His stories were written in a simple and lucid language, but he employed a variety of approaches, from realism and naturalism to surrealistic fantasy, breaking new ground and introducing a whole range of literary models and presenting new possibilities for the further development of the genre. He experimented with disrupted chronology and non-linear or circular plots, applying these techniques to both his realistic and surrealist writings. Hedāyat lived at what he regarded as a time of repression. The restrictive social climate cast a long shadow over his work, intensifying his pessimism and insecurity. Not surprisingly, almost all of his short stories finish either with the death or the suicide of the main character and few express emotions other than despair, philosophical perplexity, and psychological anxiety. His mode of thinking and narrative techniques left a lasting impression on other Persian writers.

In the early short stories of Bozorg ʿAlawī (q.v., 1904-97), and especially in his collection *Čamadān* (Suitcase, 1934), the reader encounters the same melancholic and confused characters as in Hedāyat's fiction. However, ʿAlawī's arrest and imprisonment on account of his leftist activities brought a fundamental change to his work. Writing from prison, he brought a new sense of realism to a thematic sub-genre—prison literature—which in later years found a steady following among Persian authors (see above ii.). His collection

of five short stories, *Waraq-pārahā-yezendān* (1941, tr. in Raffat, pp. 115-96), and especially the short stories "Enteẓār" (The wait) and "ʿAfw-e ʿomūmī" (General amnesty), reveal the plight of political and non-political prisoners in abominable prison conditions, and the harsh treatment meted out by government agents and prison wardens. ʿAlawī's later works, such as the short stories "Gīla mard" and "Nāmahā" in the collection *Nāmahā* (Letters, 1951), give vent to an angry, combative spirit with a strong sense of moral responsibility. Most of his mature works, written when he was a member of the Tudeh (communist) party, can be categorized as political short stories which explore the subject of social commitment. Unlike Hedāyat, who focused on the psychological complexity and latent vulnerabilities of the individual, ʿAlawī depicts ideologically motivated personages defying oppression and social injustice. Such characters, seldom portrayed before in Persian fiction, are ʿAlawī's main contribution to the thematic range of the modern Persian short story. This commitment to social issues is emulated by Fereydūn Tonokabonī (b. 1937), Maḥmūd Dawlatābādī (b. 1940), Ṣamad Behrangī (q.v.; 1939-68), and other writers of the left in the next generation.

ʿAlawī's interest in lyrical and erotic themes is another distinctive trait of his writings, which sets his fiction apart from the works of Hedāyat and from the writers of the next generation such as Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad (1923-69, q.v.) and Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Sāʿedī (1935-85). ʿAlawī displays a remarkable talent for creating vivid female characters. The women in his stories are neither sanctified nor reviled, as often happens in the works of other Persian writers. For example, the heroines of sentimental and romantic authors like Moḥammad Ḥejāzī (1899-77) and ʿAlī Daštī (1896-1981) often present a one-dimensional persona as fickle and treacherous coquettes. Modernists like Hedāyat and Ṣādeq Čūbak (1916-98), on the other hand, paint erotic scenes in a dreamy or naturalistic manner, often influenced by the tenets of psychoanalysis. ʿAlawī's writings also show the underlying influence of Freud but without appearing forced or doctrinaire. He succeeds in creating complex and multidimensional female characters and portrays physical love as natural, desirable, and pleasing. His treatment of gender issues influenced a later generation of writers like Jamāl Mīrṣādeqī (b. 1933) in *Derāznā-ye šab* (Length of the night, 1970), and Hūšang Golšīrī in *Krīstīn o kīd*.

The short spell of relative freedom which followed the abdication of Reżā Shah in 1941 opened new horizons for the modern Persian short story. The ascendancy of the left and radical views in general and the influence of the

Tudeh party in particular, culminating in the First Congress of Persian Writers in 1946, had a powerful and lasting effect on the majority of writers. The political changes in the country loosened the grip of censorship on the press. Before 1941 government censors targeted not only subversive political ideas, but also acted as moral guardians, banning swear-words or openly erotic scenes. Writers were forced to resort to oblique hints and stilted dialogues purified of any obscenities. This strict moral code affected not only the subject matter, but also the language of literature.

Ṣādeq Čūbak was one of the first authors to break the taboo. Following the example of William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Erskine Caldwell, and Ernest Hemingway, his blunt approach appears in the early short story collections *Ḵayma šab-bāzī* (The puppet show, 1945) and *Antar-ī ke lūṭī-aš morda būd* (1949; tr. P. Avery as "The Baboon whose Buffoon was Dead," *New World Writing* 11, 1957, pp. 14-24). Later stories like *Zīr-e čerāḡ-e qermez*, *Pīrāhan-e zereškī*, and *Čerā daryā ṭūfānī šoda būd* describe the naked bestiality and moral degradation of the personages with no trace of squeamishness. His short stories mirror a rotting society, populated by the crushed and the defeated. Čūbak picks marginal characters—vagrants, pigeon-racers, corpse-washers, prostitutes, and opium addicts—who rarely appear in the fiction of his predecessors, and whom he portrays with vividness and force. His readers come face to face with grim realities and incidents which they have often witnessed for themselves in everyday life but shunned out of their mind through complacency. This forced encounter is not to everyone's taste and explains the strong hostility that Čūbak sometimes arouses, especially as his dark portrayal of depravities and squalor leaves little room for the potentially beautiful or joyous aspects of life. His language is rough and direct, with a profusion of proverbs, slang expressions, and street jargon. The spelling is mostly colloquialized. Some of his stories employ the syntactic structure of southern dialects from the Būšehr region.

A distinctive trait of post-war Persian fiction, in all the three stages of development, is the attention devoted to narrative styles and techniques. In matters of style two main trends prevail: Some authors, like Čūbak and Āl-e Aḥmad, follow colloquial speech patterns; others, such as Ebrāhīm Golestān (b. 1922) and Moḥammad Eʿtemādzāda "Behāḏīn" (b. 1915), have adopted a more literary and lyrical tone. Although the work of all four writers stretch into later periods, some brief remarks about their differing techniques, which delineated future paths, need mentioning at the outset.

Golestān experimented with different narrative styles, and it was only in two late collections of stories, *Jūy o dīvār o tešna* (The stream and the wall and the parched, 1967) and *Madd o meh* (The tide and the mist, 1969) that he managed to find a style and voice of his own. His poetic language draws inspiration both from syntactical forms of classical Persian prose, and the experiments of modernist writers, most notably Gertrude Stein. The influence of modernism is evident also in the structure of Golestān's short stories, where the traditional linear plot-line is abandoned in favor of disrupted chronology and free association of ideas. Contrary to most other modern Persian authors, Golestān pays little heed to the state of the poor and the dispossessed. Instead, his short stories are devoted to the world of Persian intellectuals, their concerns, anxieties and private obsessions. His short stories resemble well-made decorative objets d'art, pleasing perhaps to the cognoscenti but leaving the majority of readers unmoved. Golestān's brand of modernism has influenced the later generation of writers like Bahman Forsī (b. 1933) and Hūšang Golšīrī (b. 1937).

Although the stories of Behāḏīn show similar indebtedness to classical Persian models, he does not follow Golestān's modernist experiments with syntax. Behāḏīn is an author whose stories, delivered in a lucid literary style, express his leftist social beliefs. In some of his later works like the short story collection *Mohra-ye mār* (The snake charm, 1955), he turns to literary allegory, imbuing ancient tales with a new message, a technique which allows him to express his critical views obliquely. Behāḏīn's predecessors in the sub-genre of the allegorical tale were Hedāyat (in *Āb-e zendagī*, 1931) and Čūbak ("Esāʾa-ye adab" in the collection *Ḵayma-šab-bāzī*).

PERIOD OF GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

This second period in the development of the modern Persian short story began with the coup of 28 Mordād 1332/19 August 1953 (see COUP D'ETAT OF 1332 Š./1953), and ended with the revolution of 1979.

The relative freedom experienced in Persia after Reżā Shah's abdication in 1320 Š./1941 had ensured a more liberal exchange of views in society, while the concurrent boom in publishing and translation introduced the Persian public to classics of world literature. All these factors contributed to the development of modern Persian fiction. In spite of the political upheavals, which limited the opportunities for new writers, established authors like Āl-e Aḥmad, Golestān, and Behāḏīn went on to write their best works. The writers

of this so-called “Second Generation,” some of the most creative new talent in Persian fiction, also came of age during that period. Even authors like Maḥmūd Dawlatābādī (b. 1940), Esmāʿīl Faṣīḥ (b. 1935), Maḥmūd Kīānūš (b. 1934), and Aṣḡar Elāhī (b. 1944), who created their best known stories in the next period (the period of diversity), matured in the cultural and social climate after the coup. Many of these younger authors started publishing their stories in the late 1950s, either in magazines or by small presses which printed their works in a few hundred copies, often at the author’s own expense. Despite all social and political difficulties, this period is considered by some critics as the heyday of modern Persian narrative fiction. During this era of growth and development, the short story continued to be the leading narrative genre of modern Persian fiction, the favorite medium for new authors, with the exception of ʿAlī-Moḥammad Afḡānī, whose novel *Šawhar-e Āhū Ḵanūm*, published in 1961, was his first work. Most of the stories from this period focus on the predicaments of the little man and the anti-hero. They criticize the oppression by the ruling regime, and create a disturbing picture of the pain, poverty, and ignorance afflicting the common folk.

Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad is among the proponents of new political and cultural ideas whose influence and impact straddle both the first and the second periods in the history of modern Persian fiction. His writings show an awareness of the works of Franz Fanon and the new generation of third-world writers concerned with the problems of cultural domination by colonial powers.

Āl-e Aḥmad, Behāḏīn, Tonokabonī, and Behrangī can all be described as *engagé* writers because most of their stories are built around a central ideological tenet or “thesis” and illustrate the authors’ political views and leanings. The events of their plot-lines are usually recounted in the simplest and most accessible terms, without any ambiguities or stylistic embellishments. Although each author expounds a different set of “theses,” their writings share a strong leftist tendency for relentless social criticism and a preoccupation with the political, social, or ideological message of their stories.

Another notable author from this period is Sīmīn Dānešvar (b. 1921), the first woman writer of note in contemporary Persian literature. Her reputation rests largely on her popular novel *Savūšūn* (1969). Sīmīn Dānešvar’s short stories deserve mention because they focus on the plight and social exclusion of women in Persian society and address topical issues from a woman’s point of view.

The repression of liberal thought during this period casts a shadow on the work of some younger writers, whose stories mirror a society raked by fear, uncertainty, and loss of innocence. Distinctive features of short fiction after the coup are attention to regional issues, to peasant life, and to the formative years of childhood; frequent resort to allegory, myth, and to legendary personages from the national and religious traditions; and emphasis on psychological portrayals. Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Sāʿedī (1935-85), Bahrām Ṣādeqī (1936-84), Taqī Modarresī (1932-97), Golī Taraqqī (b. 1939), Hūšang Golšīrī (b. 1937), and Aṣḡar Elāhī (b. 1944) are all noted for applying psychoanalytical theories in their work.

Childhood memories, as mentioned above, also play a considerable role in the short stories from this period. There had of course been earlier stories written from a child's point of view, but for the writers who came of creative age during the period of growth and development, the return to childhood and adolescence became a recurrent motif, enabling them to depict the life around them from a child's refreshingly unalloyed stance. Jāmāl Mīrṣādeqī, Maḥmūd Kīānūš, Golī Taraqqī, and Mahšīd Amīršāhī have exploited this technique in some of their works.

Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Sāʿedī's (1935-85) short stories, which he called *qeṣṣa*, often transcend the boundaries of realism and attain a symbolic significance. His allegorical stories, which occasionally resemble folkloric tales and fables, are inhabited by displaced persons, trapped in dead ends (Sepānlū, p. 117). They emphasize the anxieties and the psychological perturbations of his deeply troubled personages. Plagued cities and abandoned villages, as two sides of the same coin, appear as a recurrent motif. The plots evolve around themes of mental or psychological illness or sudden misfortune: a calamity descends on a village, a group, or an individual, making their stark predicaments even bleaker. Sāʿedī's peculiarly dark and disturbed world, in spite of its implied rejection of realistic techniques, has a strong inner logic of its own which translates well from the medium of the short story to that of a film-script (Fischer, pp. 223-28). "Ārāmeš dar ḥożūr-e dīgarān"(Composure in the presence of others, 1967), a story in which the tormented mind of an army officer resembles the bombastic hollowness of the military edifice in Persia and prefigures its rapid disintegration represents Sāʿedī's best work. It was also highly successful as a film, directed by Nāṣer Taqwāʾī (1973). It was published in a collection entitled *Wāhemahā-ye bī-nām o nešān* (1967, tr. R. Campbell as *Nameless and Elusive Apprehensions*, New York, 1981), which also

included the story adapted as a screenplay for the film *Gāv* (The cow) by Dārīūš Mehrjūʾī in 1973. Two of Sāʿedī's later works, highly critical of the Pahlavi regime—*Ḡarība dar šahr* (Stranger in the city, 1980), and *Tātār-e ḵandān* (The grinning Tatar, 1984)—saw the light of day only after the revolution. He left for Paris after the revolution, where he died in 1985. Sāʿedī's vivid portrayal of the south of Persia as a hot and humid region, wronged by both nature and modern technology, distinguished him, along with Čūbak, Maḥmūd, Behrangī, Āl-e Aḥmad, Dānešvar, Dowlatābādī, and Faṣīḥ, as pioneers of a distinct type of regional literature (Sepānlū, 1992, pp. 62-67; Yāḥaqqī, p. 219; ʿĀbedīnī, 1987-98, II, pp. 111-18).

Bahrām Ṣādeqī (1936-84) was yet another author who focused on the anxieties and secret mental agonies of his personages. After the coup of 1953 and its aftermath, he became convinced of the futility of social activism and political resistance. His work, as in his novella *Malakūt*, is marked by chronic hopelessness, and dissatisfaction with the emptiness of existence; fear of death is a recurrent theme of his short stories. Supernatural elements and somber ruminations are also distinctive features of his writings. Although his characters come from all walks of life, and include students, civil servants, and teachers, they are all driven by similar fears, anxieties and morbid fantasies. In contrast, the simple and sensual pleasures of life appear stale and trite in his stories. This paradoxical mixture of inertia and cynical black humor also pervades the fiction of Golī Taraqqī. She is also strongly influenced by Jungian ideas. The characters in her long and short stories are all perplexed and impotent in different ways, unable to come to a decision and find a way out of their unsatisfactory predicaments.

Hūšang Golšīrī (b. 1937) and Aṣḡar Elāhī (b. 1944) both created memorable psychological portraits through interior monologue and stream of consciousness techniques. Golšīrī, the author of the long story *Šāzda Eḥátejāb* (Prince Eḥtejāb, 1968), is particularly noted for his successful experiments with extended interior monologues. A bold, innovative writer eager to explore modern methods and styles, Golšīrī uses stream of consciousness narrative to reassess familiar theories and events.

Aṣḡar Elāhī (b. 1944), who started out writing angry political pamphlets, gradually turned towards the stream of consciousness technique. The short stories from his collection, *Dīgar Sīāvašī-namānda* (The likes of Sīāvaš are no more, 1990) often rely on the free association of ideas. The interior monologue of his characters draws on their previous experiences to create an imaginary

world, built on the sediments of the past. Jamāl Mīrṣādeqī, Maḥmūd Kīānūš, and Mahšīd Amīršāhī are other well known writers from this period. Taqī Modarresī, whose first novel *Yakolyā wa tanhā-ī-e ū* (see above ii.) brought him instant fame, also wrote some psychological short stories but with far less success.

Maḥmūd Kīānūš's (b. 1934) narratives, drawing on the author's personal experiences, have an engaging simplicity. *Ḡoṣṣahā wa qesÂsÂahā* (Sorrows and sagas, 1965), a collection of seven connected stories, is his best known work. It recounts the events which befall a small boy and his family, from the point of view of the boy.

Mahšīd Amīršāhī (b. 1940) prefers experimental writing to conventional plots. Most of her works are literary sketches rather than true short stories, though some, like the title story of the collection *Bʿad az rūz-e āḵer* (After the last day, 1969), do have well-defined plot-lines. This particular short story is a first-person narrative, recounted by a woman who finds new meaning in life after an attempted suicide. Amīršahī's stories and sketches are written in an informal conversational style. Her prose is clear-cut and unadorned, delivered in laconic sentences and evocative language.

Aḥmad Maḥmūd (Aḥmad ʿAṭāʾ; b. 1930) and Maḥmūd Dawlatābādī (b. 1940) are among the most prominent writers on rural and regional themes in modern Persian literature. Although both have written a number of short stories, their fame rests largely on their panoramic novels. Their stories are faithful portrayals of Khorasan, the north-eastern region of Persia, and of Ahvāz in the south-west, respectively, recounting the customs and traditions of the local inhabitants. Their short stories reveal the tragic lives of the poor who, gripped by dire need, are ready to sell their own flesh and blood in order to survive. They portray sharecroppers crushed by the tyranny of landlords and browbeaten by village law-enforcers, or peasants forced off their land by drought and famine, who flock to the cities to swell the ranks of the jobless. Pictures of poverty and despair are juxtaposed with the trivial pursuits of wanton landlords, greedy village elders and police agents, against a backdrop of cheerless village life.

Towards the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, the wave of protests against social oppression and dictatorial rule swelled with the rise of popular dissatisfaction. Censorship intensified and the confiscation of adverse published materials became routine. Some authors were imprisoned. To avoid

censorship, many short-story writers turned to allegorical fiction, establishing a new sub-genre of symbolical short stories in modern Persian literature. Hūšang Golšīrī's short story "Maʿṣūm" in the collection *Namāz-ḵāna-ye kučak-e man* (My little prayer-room, 1975) relies on allegorical techniques to express obliquely the oppressive social and political conditions in the country. Jamāl MīrsÂādeqī resorts to a similar stratagem in his short story *Dovālpā* (1971). Put under enormous political, social, and psychological pressure, the characters in his stories nearly lose their individuality and essential humanity but finally manage to regain their true selves. Ṣamad Behrangī, whose best-known tale is "Māhī-e sīāh-e kūčūlū" (1968; tr. M. and E. Hooglund as "The Little Black Fish" in *The Little Black Fish and Other Modern Persian Stories*, Washington, D.C., l976), wrote stories for children and young adults. Behrangī's works use the suggestive power of legend and the folk take to highlight the need for political activism and social commitment.

Two other writers from the same generation, whose works fall outside the present classification, are Šahrnūš Pārsīpūr (b. 1947) and Ḡazāla ʿAlīzāda (1948-96). Pārsīpūr is better known for her novels. She has only two collections of shorter fiction: *Āvīzahā-ye bolūr* (The crystal ear-rings, 1977), which contains fantastic and surrealist sketches and stories, and *Zanān bedūn-e mardān* (Women without men, 1990), a book of connected stories about the issues which arise when several women with very different characters and sensibilities decide to live together. ʿAlīzāda was also primarily a novelist. She wrote only one collection of short stories, *Safar-e nāgoḏaštanī* (Journey without end, 1977), containing three surrealist stories of magical quests. The poetic language of her prose is in harmony with the arcane subject-matter.

THE PERIOD OF DIVERSITY

The third period in the development of modern Persian fiction has brought forth disparate literary movements. The Revolution of 1978-79 with its political purges and dramatic social upheavals, and the war between Iraq and Persia with its heavy loss in human life, have presented authors with new themes and topics. At first the most established Persian writers continued pursuing their original concerns—the struggle against the injustices of the former regime, the drive for freedom of thought and speech, and of the press. These aspirations coincided with the initial goals of the revolutionary movement, and in the first few years after the revolution the modern Persian short story made considerable progress. Some of the well-known writers of the previous period developed their short stories in new directions; new authors

created works worthy of notice. The number of short-story writers increased, with many women among them. Despite this sudden growth, it soon became apparent that the new regime favored traditionalist writers and had little regard for modernity. Traditionalism became the official policy in all spheres of life. Writers were encouraged to turn to traditional models and to reviving trends which had all but expired after the Constitutional movement. The traditional stories (*qeṣṣa*) was suddenly spruced up again and promoted as a new sub-genre: the Islamic tale. Islamic policy makers were convinced that modern writers, bewitched by a paradoxical mixture of a narrow and limiting concept of human reason on the one hand, and by their obsession with carnal instincts on the other, were incapable of attaining to the higher reality of divine revelation. Traditional story-telling was seen as a suitable medium for the popularization of religious thought and theological ideas. Thus, in an attempt to create new Islamic fiction, many Islamic writers abandoned the literary standards and creative criteria of the short-story genre.

Subsidized and promoted by the establishment, the new Islamic stories were expected to demonstrate two basic qualities: piety and a suitable choice of themes and subject matter. The authors who followed the government's direction focused on religious myths and legends and on the political and social problems of the day. The new trend had no occasion to mature or to attain artistic distinction. Most of the Islamic tales were built around well-worn themes and contrived characters. They were hastily patched up together, full of clichés, and poorly crafted—not unlike the literary output of Soviet socialist realism under Zhdanov, which had to serve the ideological directives of the state. The Islamic tale was in evidence for a few years but failed to gain popularity and did not even meet the expectations of its promoters among the Islamic policy-makers.

Now, two decades after the revolution, Islamic writers have gradually abandoned the folk tale genre, returning to more conventional forms of contemporary short-story writing. Some modernist authors, on the other hand, have followed modernism and post-modernism to an excessive degree, severing all ties with their immediate social environment, and succumbing to nihilistic moods and individualistic fantasies. Such works are often crude and unreadable imitations of world-famous masterpieces. However, the majority of Persian writers are following in the footsteps of their notable predecessors and, drawing on the new achievements of world literature, continue to develop and expand modern Persian fiction. Many have published novels and

short stories worthy of notice (see iv. below). Still, it is too early for an objective assessment of the post-revolutionary period in Persian fiction. In time the chaotic diversity of literary movements and fads will settle into a discernible pattern. Only then will it be fully possible to distinguish the writers whose works have endured and to assess their artistic merit.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

. See below, ii(d).