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FICTION, II(G)
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ii(g). IN AFGHANISTAN

The introduction of modern fiction in Afghanistan was concomitant with the institution of new educational and literary organizations, namely the Ḥabībīya School and Anjoman-e adabī, and the publication of the bi-weekly *Serāj al-aḵbār-e afḡānīya*, edited by Maḥmūd Ṭarzī, in the early twentieth century. In addition to editorials, news articles, and political and social commentaries, *Serāj al-aḵbār* contained numerous pieces of poetry and short stories. Hoping to generate a new literary consciousness, Ṭarzī contrasted the prevalent approaches in what he called "eastern" and "western" fictions in a series of articles entitled "What is literature?" and clearly advocated the introduction of Western models and genres. He maintained that traditional narratives (*qeṣṣa, afsāna*, and *rewāyat*) were no longer adequate to address subject matters that could be expressed only through European genres like the novel and short story (Ṭarzī, pp. 721-27). To this end, he published translations of a variety of foreign poetry as well as a number of novels from foreign languages. While the extent of Ṭarzī's own influence in the cultural scene of early twentieth century Afghanistan is difficult to assess, *Serāj al-aḵbār* provided the earliest and most important forum for the dissemination of modern trends in Afghan fiction (Rażawī, pp. 22-30; Pōyā-Fāryābī, 1988, pp. 68-73; idem, 1996, pp. 23-27).

Following the assassination of Amīr Ḥabīb-Allāh in 1919, his son and successor Amān-Allāh attempted to recruit prominent literary and cultural figures for

his regime. Furthermore, he attempted, much more rigorously than his father, to introduce a number of social and cultural reforms. As part of this program, several official and semi-official newspapers and journals started to appear in Kabul and the provinces in the 1920s (Pourhadi, pp. 29-30). Although they all contained pieces of fiction and poetry, only *Nasīm-e saḥar* and *Moʿarref-e moʿāref* (later named *Āyīna-ye ʿerfān* and further shortened to *ʿErfān*, were predominantly literary journals. The earliest works of fiction in Afghanistan date from this decade.

In 1919, Moḥammad-Ḥosayn, who had returned from India and was serving as an instructor at the Ḥabībīya School, wrote *Jehād-e akbar* (The greatest battle) which is now considered the earliest piece of modern fiction in Afghanistan. As the title suggests, the story revolves around the struggle of Afghan fighters against the British in the nineteenth century. Soon afterwards, ʿAbd-al-Qāder Afandī, another former exile in India, published the story *Taṣwīr-e ʿebrat* (Picture of admonition), a structurally tighter and descriptively more vivid story. Another notable work of fiction in this period was *Jašn-e esteqlāl dar Bolīvīa* (The independence celebration in Bolivia) by Mortażā Aḥmad. Originally written in English, the story was soon translated into Persian and published in a somewhat abbreviated form in 1926 (Bīžand, pp. 7-16). *Lawḥa-ye wafā* (The tablet of fidelity) by Ḡolām-Ḥażrat Šāyeq Jamāl, and the pedagogical *Nedā-ye ṭalaba-ye maʿāref* (The proclamation of the students of culture) by Moḥy-al-Dīn Anīs also appeared in this period. Intended largely as social commentaries, these early works of fiction—romantic and idealist in tone and mode—reflected the changing political environment in the country. Furthermore, they contributed to the simplification of Persian prose which was until then dominated by ornate classical styles.

The downfall of Amān-Allāh in the wake of the 1929 rebellion and the succession to power of Moḥammad-Nāder (1929-33) and his son Moḥammad-Ẓāher (1933-73) affected the course of literary creativity in Afghanistan considerably. On the one hand the new power elite took repressive measures to curb independent activities of the literati and, on the other hand, sponsored cultural institutions like The Literary Society (*Anjoman-e adabī*) and The Historical Society (*Anjoman-e tārīḵ*) and expanded public education and the press to an unprecedented degree (Farhang, I, pp. 448-61). The government succeeded in establishing an active and prolific, though largely conformist, group of intelligentsia that dominated the literary and cultural scene during the period.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, in addition to the publication of short stories, a number of novels and longer novellas appeared in installments in newspapers. *Pānzdah sāl qabl* (Fifteen years ago) by Malekzāda was an early successful attempt away from the overall romantic atmosphere of the prose fiction of the preceding decades. Ebrāhīm ʿĀlamšāhī's *Šām-e tārīk, ṣobḥ-e rowšan* (Dark dusk, bright dawn) was another important story of this period. These stories, along with Solaymān-ʿAlī Jaḡōrī's *Bīgom*, Gol-Moḥammad Žwanday's *Fīrōz*, Jalāl-al-Dīn Ḵošnavā's *Ḵanjar* (Dagger), and Amīn-al-Dīn Anṣārī's *Dar jostojū-ye kīmīā* (In search of alchemy) were written in a predominantly pedagogic and overtly didactic mode (Nazemi, pp. 22-23.). These examples of prose fiction were generally critical of the prevalent social relations, and their authors advocated reform and economic progress under the direction of the state.

Two influential writers of prose fiction in the 1940s and 1950s were Najīb-Allāh Tūrwāyānā and ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Pažvāk. The more successful of Tūrvāyānā's stories consist of his semi-historical narratives, stories that betray the author's nostalgia for a glorious heritage of the past. Characters of his stories include Maḥmūd of Ḡazna, Moḥammad Ḵᵛārazmšāh and his son Jalāl-al-Dīn who resisted the Mongol onslaught, as well as men in Afghan frontiers who successfully fought the Mughal rulers of India. As Pažvāk's collection of short stories, *Afsānahā-ye mardom* (1957) suggests, popular stories, folktales, legends, and romance constitute the main component of his essentially lyrical prose fiction.

ʿAzīz-al-Raḥmān Fatḥī's novel *Dar pāy-e nastaran* (At the sweetbrier's stem, 1952) was a major contribution to the growth of Afghan fiction. Although the story lacks a well incorporated narrative plot and technically unified thematic structure, and contains many superfluous episodes, Fatḥī's work shows a better grasp of the genre of prose fiction than any of his predecessors or contemporaries in Afghanistan (Golkōhī, pp. 17-23). Fatḥī's lead was followed by younger writers of the period such as Šafīʿ Rahgoḏar, Ḥabīb-Allāh Bahjat, ʿAbd-al-Aḥmad Adā, Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Faʿʿāl, Mūsā Nahmat, and Ḥasan Ḡamīn. A prolific writers of fiction in this period was Mūsā Ḥemmat who had edited *Peymāna* (Goblet, 1963), the first anthology of contemporary short stories in Afghanistan. From the late 1950s, Afghan women increasingly engaged in writing fiction. Roq(ay)ya Abū-Bakr, Nafīsa Mobārez, Māga Raḥmānī, and Malālay Mūsā, among others, were the leading female writers who were instrumental in introducing such themes and topics as the social

marginalization of women and in calling for the improvement of women's status and education.

The year 1964 was a turning-point for contemporary fiction in Afghanistan. The promulgation of a new constitution that permitted a generally free press helped literary figures to find ready forums to publish their work and, consequently, further establish the genre of prose fiction. With the new atmosphere in Afghanistan's relations with its neighbors, books printed abroad were imported, particularly from Persia. Through this channel, new trends in Persian fiction as well as influential works of world literature in Persian translation were introduced in Afghanistan (Ghani, p. 447; Pedrām, pp. 20-22). As a result of the spread of literacy in the 1960s and 1970s, the number of potential readers of literature rose dramatically throughout the country. A rapidly expanding urban social strata, with a new conception of leisure time, were overwhelmingly receptive to the emergent forms of prose fiction.

During the 1960s, while the writing of novels declined substantially, the short story proliferated and underwent a startling qualitative change. Almost all major journals and magazines, especially those with substantial circulation, contained at least one short story per issue. Writers who wished to see their work published speedily found an incentive to write short stories instead of novels. Thus many writers, both the established and the younger ones, began to experiment seriously with this genre, using fresh criteria and exploring innovated narrative techniques. There was a distinct turn towards a supposedly realist school of writing fiction in the 1960s, though realism was hardly adequately defined by its proponents. Some emphasized the mimetic depiction of social reality, while others advocated a more critical approach towards reality. An important representative of realist fiction was Asad-Allāh Ḥabīb (b. 1941). Having studied in the Soviet Union, Ḥabīb was thoroughly exposed to Russian socialist realism, a form of fiction he openly identified with, for it best served his own ideological affinities. In addition to his short stories, his early novel *Sapīd-andām* (The white stature; 1965) was at once a tale of romantic love, heroism, defense of honor, and critical of feudal relations and official corruption. Another important fiction writer from the 1960s is Akram ʿOṯmān (b. 1937). Writing in a distinctive style of his own, ʿOṯmān's brand of "realism" differed significantly from that of his erstwhile ideological ally Ḥabīb. It contains a tacit nostalgia for old times, an authentic and harmonious past not yet adulterated with different aspects of the

quintessentially alienating modern life. For instance, the setting of his more successful stories such as *Mardhārā qawl ast* (Men keep their promises) and *Waqt-ī ke neyhā gol konad* (When the reeds bloom) is essentially the old city of Kabul. His characters come predominantly from middle and lower-middle class backgrounds, and the protagonists are mainly romantic, sentimental, chivalrous men, known for their generosity, gallantry, and keeping to their promises and words. Even though points of incongruity can be discerned in ʿOṯmān's characterization, and his unfolding of the plots and subplots are at times less than successful, his narrative description is stylistically flawless and far superior to other realist writers.

The most prominent and prolific figure in contemporary fiction in Afghanistan, however, is Aʿẓam Rahnavard Zaryāb (b. 1945). Rahnavard started writing short stories in the 1960s, when he discovered Western modernist fiction, as well as psychoanalysis and existentialism, and distinguished himself as an avant-garde writer. Four volumes of his short stories have been published in Kabul in the 1980s. Rahnavard has written several longer short stories and a number of novellas as well. His stylistically complex work *Naqšhā wa pendārhā* (Images and perceptions, 1970) runs like a myriad of segments that render the story thematically ambiguous. Told in the first person singular, the story is essentially a fantastic, adventurous journey. Throughout, the reader is constantly confronted with misplaced identities as the narrator is presented simultaneously as a "self" and an "other." The "other" appears sometimes as the shadow of the "self" and other times as a drunken intellectual, a wandering poet, a murderer (who incidentally resembles his victim), a lover, a lone teacher, and an Indian Maharaja. Strong affinities exist between this novel and Ṣādeq Ḥedāyat's *Būf-e Kūr*, betraying the influence of the latter on Rahnavard.

The Soviet invasion in 1979 had an unparalleled effect on literary production and reception in Afghanistan. As the anti-Soviet war of resistance took momentum throughout the 1980s, literature turned into a highly politicized contested space. Abstract critical notions such as "commitment" and "conformity" assumed ideologically concrete dimensions and were openly associated with either resistance to, or collaboration with, the government, which, for its part, attempted to create cultural organizations and literary institutions that actively propagated the official state policies (Abdali, pp. 70-72). Many new as well as established writers initially joined such organizations as Union of the Writers of Afghanistan which was clearly

modeled after Soviet prototypes. It was in this cultural atmosphere that the author Asad-Allāh Ḥabīb, then an influential state functionary and the president of the Union of Writers, published such short stories as *Āḵerīn ārzō* (The last wish; 1984) and *Doḵtar-ī bā pīrāhan-e safīd* (A girl in a white dress, 1985), both stories filled with selfless acts of heroic protagonists determined to defend "the toiling masses" against "forces of reaction." As it was to be expected the characters are not presented in depth and do not form round and fully developed personalities. Being types rather than individual characters their actions take place within a clear preset picture of social relations. This identifiable trend is also discernible in various works of acolytes of Ḥabīb, including Karīm Mīṭāq, Ḥosayn Faḵrī, Babrak Arǧand, and Qadīr Ḥabīb, among others.

Despite its comparatively vast resources, the official literary and aesthetic discourse failed to constitute itself as the dominant voice in Afghan fiction. Standing apart from, or on the margins of, the official Union of the Writers, several independent literary associations (*kānūn*s) emerged in the latter part of the 1980s. It was then that a non-establishment modernist like Spožmay Zaryāb (b. 1946) published two collections of short stories, *Šerang-šerang-e zanghā* (The tolling of bells; 1988) and *Dašt-e qābīl* (Cain's plain; 1989), and a novel entitled *Dar kešvar-ī dīgar* (In another country). The distinguishing element of her fiction was narrative openness, an emblematic modernist device that, as employed reflexively by women writers, can be far more enabling in terms of *écriture féminine* than the traditional linear narratives. The emergent writer Qāder Morādī also used this device, along with the practice of interior monologue. His short stories, collected in *Šab-ī ke bārān mēbārīd* (The night it was raining, 1989) and *Ṣadā-ī az ḵākestar* (A voice from the ash, 1996) were both exemplary works of complex modernist narratives as well as reflections on, and responses to, the reality of war and destruction that surrounded the author.

Throughout the 1980s, many Afghan writers chose exile. Some actively joined the resistance and contributed to a highly ideologically charged fiction that, in the name of an oppositional aesthetics, structurally varied little from the work produced inside the country. Notable exceptions in this regard were Maryam Maḥbūb and Zalmay Bābā-Kōhī in the West, and several writers in Persia and Pakistan, e.g., Sarvar Āzaraḵš, Ḵāled Navīsā, Bāqer ʿĀdelī, and Sayyed Esḥāq Šojāʿī, who attempted to creatively explore the complexity of their new environments under the conditions of exile, displacement, and homelessness.

In this regard, Azaraḵš's novel *Āvār-e šab* (The burden of night, 1998) and Morādī's collection of stories, *Raftahā bar namīgardand* (The ones gone do not return, 1998) are especially worthy of mention.

The coming to power in Kabul of the former resistance groups in April 1992 resulted in a protracted civil war and chaos. Literary institutions and cultural organizations were largely disbanded, for the writers' struggle for basic survival and sustenance took precedence over literary productivity. Disillusioned and dispirited, many more writers left the country. The advent of the Ṭālebān militia since 1994 further expedited this trend. The future directions of contemporary fiction in Afghanistan are unclear. What is clear, however, is that in times of historical crises the writing of fiction means ontological affirmation. The works of emergent writers, whether inside the country or in exile, increasingly demonstrate that many an Afghan writer knows that the very act of creating a story means presence and actuality; not creating will be tantamount to absence and extinction.

See Also: AFGHANISTAN xii.

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