



# FRANCE X. FRENCH LITERATURE IN PERSIA

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In the last two centuries, French literature has had a significant impact on modern Persian literature. The new trends in Persian literature in the beginning of the 20th century are closely related to social and political changes which began in Persia under Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah (1848-96), and brought about the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-11 (see [CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION vii](#)) and the advent of the Pahlavi regime. An analysis of the contributing factors such as the birth of the printing press, the development of newspapers and journals, and the reform of the educational system, enables us to define with relative certainty the different stages of the growth of a new reading public and the creation of new genres of fiction in whose formation translations of French texts played an important part.

A study of available sources, whether still in manuscript form or in print, conveys the magnitude of this translation movement which, in its most active phase, extends over a century. As the 20th century draws to a close, the great demand for translations shows no sign of abating. After the Second World War, for political reasons, French lost its dominant position to English, but this did not imply its disappearance from the Persian cultural scene. On the



contrary, a deeper and more subtle understanding of French literature seems to have developed in Persia, with many Persian literary critics exploring current French theories of criticism for theoretical scaffoldings to their own analysis of literary texts. Works introducing western critical concepts which began to appear in mid 1950s, including Reżā Sayyed Ḥosaynī's *Maktabhā-ye adabī* (Tehran, 1955) and Dr. Mītrā's (Sīrūs Parhām)'s *Re'ālism wa zedd-e re'ālism dar adabiyāt* (Tehran, 1955), were widely read and reprinted, and translations of essays by Roland Barthes (tr. Moḥammad Taqī Gīātī, *Naqd-e tafsīrī-ye bīst maqāla*, Tehran, 1973) and other modern critics continued the trend.

The first element in the evolution of the modern Persian literary system was the advent of the printing press (see ČĀP) in the beginning of the 19th century. It was instrumental in creating a much wider and cheaper distribution of cultural works, in dissemination of newspapers, and in providing educational support for the new schools. The establishment of Dār al-Fonūn (q.v.) in 1851 and other modern schools required tens of translations on technical and scientific subjects, as well as on literary works. These were made from the French because, for political reasons, the teaching staff had been recruited mostly from central Europe where French was the language of diplomacy and culture (Rouhbakhshan, pp. 37-40).

Within this context, translations played a mediating and pivotal role. They provided the bulk of the political, scientific and cultural material items of news for the journals and newspapers which had begun to appear, whether published by the government or by the political opposition abroad in Calcutta, Istanbul, Tiflis, Baghdad, Cairo, Paris, Berlin, and London (see [DIASPORA](#)).

The translation of French works into Persian, also dating back to the 1830s and the first printing presses, has witnessed high tides and low ebbs as a result of socio-political events which have shaped recent Persian history. The first of these was the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11, q.v.). Most of the translations prior to it remain in manuscript form and a large collection of these unedited manuscripts are preserved in the National library in Tehran. About half of these texts are works of fiction, a quarter are history books, and the rest are memoirs or scientific works. At first there does not seem to be any underlying logic behind the choice of texts for translation. Authors as widely different as René Lesage, Voltaire, Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, Comtesse de Ségur, and Fénelon were all translated. Yet, within the intellectual and historical context of the time, an underlying concept of knowledge can be detected as the



common denominator among these authors. The choice was not primarily based on the work's inherent literary quality or merit. Increasingly mindful of their technological backwardness, the Persians of the time preferred texts that they thought would enhance their knowledge of the outside world, i.e., of history and geography or, more generally, any text which would lead them to a better understanding of Europe which was to serve henceforth as their model for modernization.

For translation purposes, Voltaire's *L'histoire de Charles XII*, *Gil Blas* by Lesage, *Télémaque* by Fénelon, or Alexandre Dumas' *La Reine Margot* were all on a par. It was the extreme diversity of his work, covering the whole gamut of French history, that made Alexandre Dumas *père* the most translated author into Persian.

From the outset French theater occupied a special place in the choice of translators. This was due to the development of the modern education system in which French classical drama was read as part of the curriculum, as well as to occasional performances in Tehran and Rašt (Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* IV, pp. 459-64; Nawwābī, pp. 85-87). For example, Molière's *Le médecin malgré lui*, the first French play to be performed in Persian, was published by the office of translations at the Dār al-Fonūn (tr. in 1888 by Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan Moqaddam Marāḡā'ī, E'temād-al-Salṭana (1843-96; q.v.; Āryanpūr, *Az Ṣabā tā Nīmā* I, pp. 267-68; Bala, pp. 25-27). Molière's *Le Misanthrope* was translated from Turkish and published by Mīrzā Ḥabīb Eṣfahānī (1835-93, q.v., Afšār, p. 495) in Istanbul in 1869; another example was the same author's *Mariage forcé* translated and published in Tehran in 1904 by Moḥammad Ṭāher Mīrzā (1834-98; q.v. Āryanpūr, *Az Ṣabā tā Nīmā* I, pp. 271-72; Bala, pp. 31-33) the famous translator of Alexandre Dumas' works.

From the Constitutional Revolution to Reżā Khan's Coup d'état of 1299/1921 (q.v.), there were not only translations of authors who had already been translated, but new ones were also added to the list: Bernardin de St. Pierre (*Paul et Virginie*) Eugène Sue (*Les Mystères de Paris*), Victor Hugo (*Les Misérables*), L'abbé Prévost (*Mannon Lescaut*), Ponson du Terrail, Pierre Loti, and Paul de Kock. The rise of the literary review was another important cultural event of the period. These reviews devoted considerable attention to the translation of poetry and prose. The earliest of these periodicals was the monthly Bahār (q.v.) founded in 1910 by Mīrzā Yūsof Khan Āštiānī, E'teṣām-al-Molk (1874-1938; see [E'TEṢĀMĪ](#); Āryanpūr, *Az Ṣabā tā Nīmā* II, pp. 112-17), the father of the famous poet Parvīn E'teṣāmī (q.v.). The first translation of Victor



Hugo's *Les Misérables* (tr. as *Tīra-baḳtān*) was serialized in *Bahār* during 1910. Other famous reviews attempting similar translations were *Dāneškada*, *Armaḡān*, and *Now Bahār*, first published in Mašhad as a political journal in 1910 by Moḡammad-Taḡī Malek al-Šo'arā' Bahār (1886-1951, q.v.) and then later in Tehran in 1922 as a literary review (*Āryanpūr*, *Az Šabā tā Nīmā* II, p. 332). After World War II literary reviews showed a considerable and uninterrupted development. Among them, *Soḳan* was the most receptive to the literature of other countries. Looking through its issues, one can find the names of all those important French writers hitherto unknown in Persia, as well as those of the majority of the best known modern Persian writers.

Under Reżā Shah (1925-41) those French writers already known in Persia continued to be translated. Others, such as Maurice Leblanc, Michel Zevago, or Lamartine, were added to the list. It was only until after the Second World War that great French writers, such as Montesquieu, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, etc., were translated into Persian.

The first translators came from different social backgrounds. Before the Constitutional Revolution there were some twenty famous names among them, including the already mentioned E'temād-al-Salṭana, Mīrzā Ḥabīb Ešfahānī, and Moḡammad Ṭāher Mīrzā; as well as 'Abd-al-Raḡmān Ṭālebov (1834-1911), and Mīrzā Āḡā Khan Kermānī (1854-96). They were intellectuals, writers, and high officials of the state. In the following period mention must be made of Moḡammad Ḥosayn Khan Doḳā'-al-Molk Forūḡī (1839-1907; q.v.), the famous statesman and man of letters, who for years directed the office of translations at Dār al-Fonūn; Moḡammad-Taḡī Bahār; 'Alīqolī Khan Sardār As'ad Baḳtīārī (1857-1917; see [BAḲTĪĀRĪ](#) chiefs); Ḡolām-Reżā Rašīd Yāsamī (1895-1951), Bahār's collaborator in *Dāneškada*; Sa'īd Nafīsī (1895-1976), the famous scholar who also wrote novels; Ḥosaynqolī Mosta'ān (1904-83) a prolific writer and translator who also translated *Les Misérables* (Tehran, 1921), 'Abbās Eqbāl Āštīānī (1896 or 97-1956, q.v.); Qāsem Ḡanī (1893-1952, q.v.) the noted scholar and diarist and translator of Anatole France; the historian Našr-Allāh Falsafī (q.v., 1901-81), translator of the seminal work by the historian Fustel de Coulanges, *La Cité antique* as *Tārīḳ-e tamaddon-e qadīm* (Tehran, 1930) and finally Moḡammad Ḥejāzī (q.v. 1900-1973) and 'Alī Daštī (q.v., 1896-1981), both also noted politicians and novelists (Nawwābī, pp. 93-98).

Two writer-translators played a pivotal role in the development of modern fiction in the decades between 1920 and 1940 and deserve to be singled out:



Moḥammad-ʿAlī Jamālzāda (q.v., 1895-1997) and Šādeq Hedāyat (q.v., 1903-51). Their contributions illustrate the way many of the most influential writers of fiction in modern Persia were influenced not only by translations from European and American literature, but by their own direct and thorough immersion in western literature. It should be noted that two of Hedāyat's short stories, *Lunatique* and *Sampingué*, were written both in French and Persian (Ḥasan Qā'emīān, ed., *Majmū'a-ye neveštahā-ye parākanda-ye Šādeq Hedāyat*, 2nd rev.ed., Tehran, 1956, pp. 551-624).

With the expansion of American influence at the end of World War II and particularly after the fall of Moṣaddeq's government in 1953, French gradually lost ground to English which became the second language in Persia. Nonetheless, the period from the 1953 coup d'état to the present has been a time of intense cultural and intellectual development in which translations have played a significant part. In his already cited historical study of translations published in 1985, Dāwūd Nawwābī selects some fifty-six well-known skilled translators almost all translating from French (Nawwābī, pp. 104-6). Some great French writers hitherto neglected in Persia were at last translated including Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, and Emile Zola. Twentieth writers have also occupied an important place among those translated: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, André Maurois, André Malraux, and more recently Romain Gary and Marcel Proust have also been translated. Among famous translators of French writers mention can be made of Parvīz Nātel Kānlarī (1913-90) for Paul Valéry; Moḥammad Qāzī (1929-98) for Saint-Exupéry (*Le Petit Prince*) and Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*); M. A. Behāḍīn (Maḥmūd E'temādzāda, b. 1915) for Balzac (*Le Père Goriot*, *La Cousine Bette*, *La Peau de chagrin*, *Le Lys dans la vallée*) and Romain Rolland (*Jean Christophe*); Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad (1923-69, q.v.) for Camus (*L'Étranger*); Reżā Sayyed-Ḥosaynī (b. 1925) also for Camus (*La Peste*) and Malraux (*L'Espoir*); 'Abu'l-Ḥasan Najafī (b. 1929) for Malraux (*Antimémoires*); Aḥmad Samī'i (b. 1920) for Rousseau, Diderot, and Flaubert; and Esmā'īl Sa'ādat (b. 1925) for Rolland (*La Vie de Michel-Ange*).

In sum, it can be concluded that French literary impact on the evolution of Persian literature was decisive in the formative period of its adoption of two new literary genres, namely, the short story and the novel, and continued to be influential in the course of this century. In modern poetry (*šer-e now*) too, French influence can be detected in the seminal and innovative diction of Nīmā Yūšij (1897-1960). It should also be added that some great French writers



still remain unknown to Persian readers; such are Rabelais and those from the medieval period, the majority of classical French writers, a great number from the Romantic period, not to speak of great modern figures, such as Georges Bernanos, Charles Péguy, Paul Claudel, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, or the majority of surrealists, such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Jean Giono, or Henry de Montherlant.

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