

Objectivism and Context in the Contemporary Persian Poetry

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Abstract

Modernity changed the life and literature of the Middle East. Developments of literature in Iran were reflections of sociopolitical transformations. Turmoil that induced yell of freedom against systems, was expressed in new forms and styles within poetic creativity. Poets broke the old chain of habitual language to convey their objective social outlook in an engaged literature. They also used the new kinds of self-expression and subjectivity to emphasize poetic freedom even beyond social boundaries. In this concern, different technical traits and poetic streams emerged in Iran during last 100 years and the poetic scene seems to be fluctuating between objective—social perspective from one hand and personal—subjectivism from another hand. This paper is trying to shed a light on these transformations and fluctuations.

Key words: Objectivism; Contemporary; Persian; Poetry

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INTRODUCTION

Modern Iranian literature was the strong voice of rationality tired of the ancient system of life. The nation had great enthusiasm to get rid of the long ignorance, superstitious beliefs, and poverty resulted by the two

hundred year reign of the Qājār dynasty. Since the later years of Nāser Al-Dīn Shāh era, Iranian intellectual combined dream of modernizing Iran with the idea of a literary revolution. The literary revolution was the reflection of social developments and transformations that occurred in the Iranian society after the Constitutional movement (1905-1911). The revolutions of Europe which was reflected in the avant-garde Journals of neighborhood countries had an enormous impact on Iranians outlook. Besides, awakening movements of Russia, Caucasus and Turkey the social awareness in Iranian consciousness.

LITERARY ANALYSIS WITHIN SOCIAL CONTEXT

A large group of Iranian poets, with different and heterogeneous intellectual and political backgrounds, joined the Iranian constitutional movement. [one can mention among others Muhammad-Taqī Bahār, who used to be the poet laureate at the court of Muzaffar Al-Dīn Shāh in his youth but joined the ranks of revolutionaries later]. How did these intellectuals from different social classes¹ stand side by side in revolutionary front? It was the demand for an objective approach towards the society that put them together. Thus in the early twentieth century, Iranian literature left its old companion, mysticism (Shafī'i Kadkani, 1380/2001), further behind. General concepts and abstract perceptions in poetry became less pronounced, and the poets replaced the old subjective views with a more vivid objective outlook. Consequently, the objective attitude in Iranian literature paved the way for the appearance of a social realism. The subjective

¹ Remember Aref Qazvini the composer and singer poet who rose in the middle class, Iraj Mirza who was initially a Qajar prince, and Ali-Akbar Dehkoda the great journalist who was brought up in a low-income social class and later achieved the most outstanding levels of knowledge.

trends of classical literary tradition and the common intellectual forms and language did not have the capacity and valance needed to demonstrate the social enthusiasm. The Iranian intelligentsia of earlier times used to search for truth in the heavens and not on the earth.

On the contrary, this realistic approach suited the ideals of a generation which wanted to extend the literary developments from a subjective atmosphere to the real and objective conflicts of a developing society. Already in 1902, Mīrzā Fat-’Ali Āxoūnd Zāde had written the first critical statement about Persian poetry and had defended the general idea of a realistic literature. This was the beginning point of a movement which led to a kind of rationalism in Persian poetry during the next 50 years. In 1955 Ahmad Shāmlū introduced the poetry of life and stated that the poetic language and diction should not be alienated from real life (Shāmlū, 1379/2000). In fact, he was transmitting the heritage of Āxoūnd Zāde and the constitution generation to the posterity. Realism and objective rationality affected the poetic language, and most of the poets began to avoid the old absolutism, bombastic tone and grandiose language (Musharraf, 1391/2012). However, the establishment of the parliament could not guarantee a fundamental change in Iran’s political structure, nor was the objective approach of the poets of time seemed sufficient for renewing the poetic structures. Āref Qazvīnī, Mīrzāde Eshqī and many other intellectuals and intelligentsia of the era were engaged with the idea of a literary revolution. A group of pioneer poets were trying to achieve an artistic renewal through altering the poetic forms, but they did not succeed. These failures has been mentioned in a verse by Īraj Mīrzā (1353/1974, p.122):

“I will permute all the rhymes,
so to become the genius of these times”

The common feature among the poets of this generation was their focus on social facts, objective perspectives, avoidance from subjectivism and refusing excessive mysticism. They were all interested in modernity and social development. At the same time, they all were eager to approximate the poetic diction to the living language of ordinary people. Yet, perhaps none of them achieved the astonishing success which Īraj Mīrzā did. Given his outstanding talent in creating simple and fluent expressions, he managed to bring a wide range of subjects in to his work unprecedentedly. Iranian elite started to create and deploy new forms of Literature to impress the mass of audience. Balladry is one of the important forms of social literature within this era. The history of contemporary balladry in Iran is connected to the history of revolutions and civil developments. Also versified play writing was initiated in the early years of the twentieth century and aftermath of the World War I (Ārīyan Pūr, 1387/2008).

Despite achieving innovation in content and using a new set of vocabulary, the pioneer poets of the

constitutional era could not completely override the static view of their predecessors. They maintained the mimetic connection between the external world and their creative minds. Hence, when employing the figurative language, devices such as mimesis, simile, and allegory are favored by the majority of this generation. In such an outlook, one world act as an equivalent analogous for another, or a single issue exemplifies a general didactic or moral principle. This form of poetry is based on a set of pre-established facts and categories, thus, despite being accompanied with a will to change and development, it lacks dynamism and is disabled to bring up new spheres. However, Allegory was coordinated with the didactic and rationalistic spirit of the time, and allegorical anecdotes were popular during that era (Musharraf, 1391/2012).

By coming into power of Rezā Shāh and the failure of the constitutional movement, the national hope to obtain democracy and a real parliament was destroyed. Having entered the political scene by claiming the establishment of a republic, Rezā Shāh ascended the throne in 1927 and started a new monarchy. The atmosphere of horror which was created by murdering and exiling the revolutionaries along with the frustration resulted by the suppression, brought about a new movement within the Persian literature, known as Persian romanticism (Musharraf, 1382/2003). Feraydūn Tavalulī is the founder of this literary movement, and Xānlārī, Golchīn, Shahrīyār, and Nāder Pūr are among its prominent figures. In 1952, Feraydūn Tavalulī wrote a preface to his first collection of poems, which can be regarded as the manifesto of romantic poetry in some ways (Tavalulī, 1346/1967). Iranian romantics represented a moderate view and avoided avant-gardism. They cared about the artist imagery and personal consciousness. They introduced the connected quatrains as a new form to the Persian poetry.

Even though romanticism did not last for a long time in Iran, its deep impacts are undeniable. Romanticism bridged the poetry of Iranian constitutional movement era to the road of modernism. Many of Iranian poets [of the twentieth century] tried the romantic styles at some point in their artistic lives (Shafī’i Kadkani, 1380/2001). As such, the romantic poetry can be regarded as a transitional period. Next to this moderate current, there is the Avant-Garde movement led by Nīmā Yūshīj (1896-1960) which flourished during the second World War as an attempt to accomplish true literary modernism in Iranian poetry. Nīmā Yūshīj succeeded to create a new form by means of altering the length of verse lines and employing the rhymes arbitrarily.

What gave Nīmā Yūshīj the capability of distance tradition, was—in addition to his natural talent—his acquaintance with the classical forms of expression. Inspired by the Europe developments, He succeeded to establish a new poetic form based upon the available fields of Persian literature of which the peculiarity was a deep social outlook (Axavān Thālith, 1376/1997). Most

importantly, He freed poetry from the chain of overused words (Yāhaqī, 1375/1996).

As far as the content is concerned, Nīmā Yūshīj and his followers were trying to view the world and nature from a dynamic perspective. The most prominent common feature between Nīmā Yūshīj and the constitutional movement generation is their interest in removing sanctity and mysticism from poetry, and showing adherence to a social attitude which is accompanied with linguistic creativity.

Facing wider horizons of the industrialized world and transformations of social life towards modernity- even in a confined sense, brought the element of dynamism into the language of poetry. In this sense, dynamism does not only refer to the rhythm and tempo, but it also means altering the linguistic signs and putting them in a flexible system.

Allegories and allegorical similes, which used to be extremely effective during the last era, were replaced by symbols in the aftermath of constitution. This tendency towards symbolic language seems fair enough considering the censorship and political repression which gripped the society after the 1953 coup and the suppression of Iranian oil nationalization movement (1951).

Aside from the socially symbolic words such as night, desert, dawn, forest, and flower etc... each of which conveys certain significations, the appearance of personal and interpretable symbols, which do not convey any predetermined meaning, completely changed the spirit of Iranian poetry. The climax of this feature can be observed in the poetry of 1950's and 1960's. Nevertheless, personal symbols did not distract the poets from their social attitude (Pūr Nāmdārīyān, 1381/2002). Most of the poets of that era, namely Nīmā Yūshīj who had become old by that time, and also his younger followers such as Āyande, Shahrūdī, Forūgh, Axavān- Thālīth, Shāmlū, and even Xoyī and M. Āzarm who were from the third generation after Nīmā Yūshīj, all had certain orientations and stands on the social issues (Axavān Thālīth, 1353/1974). Social engagement still played a fundamentally major role in poetry.

The most outstanding figure of Iranian Literature "engage" i.e. Axavān Thālīth, has formulated this fact in his own way "Any person under the name of poet in any society and at any time has a special and certain commitment towards that society in which she or he lives and if s/he does not fulfill his or her special duties toward the society, s/he does not deserve the name of the poet" (Axavān Thālīth, 1348/1969, pp.50-51):

Even poets such as Sepehri who did not express any special political view in poetry, were committed to a deep human concept which is evident in their works.

Although introducing new forms was a very essential development by itself, there were still writers who needed more maneuverability in poetic structures. Therefore another new trait emerged in poetry: A kind of blank verse, which was founded mainly by Ahmad Shāmlū

(1925-2000) under the name of "White Verse", A poetry that compromised the prosodic rhythms for the natural rhythm of words. In this concern, American poetry and specially innovations brought by Walt Whitman (1819-1892) had an enormous impact on Iranian intellectuals (Musharraf, 1395/2016). However, distancing the prosody and traditional ways of expression did not cause poets to turn away from society and lose their interest in objective goals of committed literature.

Although the followers of Nīmā Yūshīj and the adherents of "White Verse" can be categorized into different groups according to their poetical attitude, having a certain personal or social context and an objective outlook is a common feature of them. This context often revealed the sociopolitical backgrounds by means of a symbolic language (Shafī ī Kadmāni, 1380/2001). Or else, it would express the personal states and feelings within a universal form of expression. In any case, the presence of a certain context and background would cause the ideological outlooks and humanistic imageries to find their way in to the text.

In the late 1960's another movement came into existence. Reluctant to mandate any obligation for art in general and for poetic activity in particular, this new trend started to reject any form of moral or social responsibility, to make the text of a dedicated space for manifesting the personal reflections and imaginations of the poet. Yadullāh Rūyāyi who founded the so called "Volume Poetry" (Shi'r - e Hajm) is a prominent figure of this group. The followers of this movement released a statement including their main principles. This statement with its complex and difficult expressions and ambiguous phrasing represents the absolutism and farfetched ideas of these poets. The only thing that one can confidently claim is that they are "seeking immediate and absolute impressions beyond the fact and reality", "impressions which override any other search of any kind" (Rūyāyi, 1357/1978, p.36). The founders of this movement were seeking a kind of "Absolute" which should be derived out of "Existential knowledge" (Ibid).

The main feature of this group was their evasion from having any social attitudes, and their tendency for taking refuge in an absolute subjectivism. Denying any certain historical, socio- political, or even heroic and mythical contexts induced a poetry laden with exaggerated imageries floating in a totally subjective atmosphere.

After the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, all various approaches—whether the objective or the non-contextual traits—continued to exist. During 1990's, a revival of the so-called "pure poetry" happened that enhanced the denial of any objective context in the works of poets such as Rezā Barāhanī (b.1935) and his followers who had an impact on the poetical sphere of post Iran- Iraq war (1980-1988).

Followers of this trait produced a current which has a postmodern approach towards poetry. The prominent

feature of these poets is their denial of any social commitment and avoidance of concentration on any specific theme (Barāhanī, 1374/1995). Patchy expressions, breaking the habitual chain of words, employing unusual fragmentary syntactic body, all together make it difficult for this kind of poetry to establish a successful connection with the audience. Likewise the western postmodern poetry which flourished in the aftermath of World War II, the Iranian postmodern poetry emerged mainly in the atmosphere of post Iran-Iraq war. Avoiding the serious and responsible, promoting the arbitrary and playful, it can be considered as the reaction of a generation which had no active role neither in revolution nor in the war but has felt the negative impact of both incidents on social life. Despite using a simple set of vocabulary, such poetry becomes more distant from objectivism and reaches to the pick of pure subjectivity.

CONCLUSION

Modern Poetry in Iran is a result of social developments of the last century and transformations in the aftermath of constitutional revolution (1905-1911) which led to the establishment of modern structures in Iran. Three main traits are distinguished which were derived out of modern artistic Iranian movement. First the stream of new poetry which was established by Nīmā Yūshīj (1896-1960) and his followers who broke the old structure of Classical form and established the Blank verse, while maintaining the prosodic rhythms as a necessary element of poetry. Even when deploying symbolic language in different occasions, followers of Nīmā usually had an objective approach towards real life. Secondly appears the “White Verse”, which is re-known under the name of Ahmad Shāmlū (1925-2000), who negated any prosodic obligation and initiated the free or the so-called “White Verse” in Iran. Both trends were obsessed by social transformations and responded to political suppression of the time in a variety of forms and styles. The third trend would be the Iranian postmodern Poetry, which emerged during 70’s under the

Name of Yadullāh Rūyāyi (b1932-) and Rezā Barāhanī, both of whom proposed a non-referential approach which denied any social or moral commitments for poetry. All of the above mentioned features and traits coexist in contemporary Persian literature and have their own figures and adherents.

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