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MODERN IRANIAN PROSE LITERATURE
AND
NATIONAL IDENTITY

Before we can discuss how the Iranian sense of national identity is reflected in twentieth century Iranian prose literature, we must ask ourselves two questions: first how to define the term national identity in a way which will prevent us from falling victim to cliches and cliched thinking and second, to determine whether or not such a sense of national identity really exists in Iran and if so how it manifests itself in contemporary Iranian life.

The identity of a human being depends not only on the moral, religious, social, cultural, ethnic and personal ties a person objectively possesses, but more important on his own image of himself, who and what he feels himself to be in relation to this tightly interwoven web. It is clear that the problem of identity is closely related to the feeling of self-esteem and a sense of function and participation in the society. To the extent that individual identities correspond to one another, we can speak of a collective or national identity¹. In

a country like Iran with such great regional and linguistic diversity, not to speak of the variety of tribes and ethnic and religious minorities, the concept becomes problematic. Do the highly individualistic Iranians actually identify with any Iranian phenomena which transcend immediate personal and environmental concerns?

Some argue that religious attachments are no longer so strong², but that identification in a socio-political sense is as strong as it ever was, particularly the ability to respond as a national entity in the face of danger from the outside. Iranian history is replete with examples of this, the main ones being: the attack of Alexander (23 centuries ago), the Arab invasion (14 centuries ago) and the Mongolian invasion (7 centuries ago). In all these cases the language, culture and traditions of the conquering countries were absorbed and assimilated into the mainstream of Iranian culture, which took these alien elements and moulted them until they were no longer recognizable. Only one generation after Alexander's invasion, his own generals had already lost their Greek identity. The Greek invasion was intellectual rather than physical. Most countries of the Western world came under the domination of Greek philosophy at that time and to a large extent still are.

In Iran, however, the Shiite sect of Islam, from which Iranian mysticism emerged, rose against Greek philosophy twelve centuries later. Persian scholars now distinguish two trends of thought: namely, *mo'tazle* and *ash'areyye* as taking opposite positions in regard to Greek philosophy, the anti-Greek group rebelled against Avicenna whose ideas were similar to the Greeks.

In the Arab invasion all present-day Arabic-speaking

countries, except Saudi Arabia, lost their previous linguistic identities (including Egypt and Syria). Iranian influence on and contribution to Arab culture was so great that many of the most important features of Islamic culture are Iranian in origin. In the Mongol invasion present-day Turkey and most other Turkish-speaking areas also surrendered their previous linguistic identities. In all points the Persian resistance against invasion was mental or intellectual rather than physical.

Iranian national identity has no definable shape, time or place. It manifests itself abruptly and unpredictably from time to time in the face of certain stimuli. Nor does it necessarily correspond to any scientific theories, offered by Western culture and civilization, except in the most general way. Wolfgang Iser's definition, "the portrait that self creates for self" is possibly the most workable definition available. Iser stresses the role of the writer who endeavours to create an attachment between author and reader³. He then goes one step further by discussing the ways in which self is related to society (the link being the writer), and ultimately points to the relationship of societies to each other.

Literature is therefore the primary means of reflecting the sense of identity, both individual and collective. Philosophy, he argues, is unsuitable for this task because of its logical and rational nature. The search for self related to identity is further documented by the anthropological-literary concept of "archetypes" and "collective consciousness", developed by the German Romantics in the early 19th century and later by such thinkers as the psychologist-mystic Jung and the critic Northrop Frye.

From this line of thought evolves the duality of self-consciousness and social consciousness. Most Westerners are familiar with archetypes in such works as the *Divine Comedy*, *Pilgrims' Progress* or *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, but relevant examples of the archetypal experience can be found in Shiite Islam, with Imam the absent who is expected to return and bring justice to the world, and also in Iranian Mithraism.

The exposure of traditional Iranian culture to Western technological civilization can perhaps be considered the fourth invasion after the Greeks, the Arabs and the Mongols. It is literally transforming consciousness in modern Iran, and has created a dilemma with two contradictory factors working simultaneously: interest in and fascination with the West, and at the same time preservation and protection of traditional Iranian culture and values.

Iran is currently in a transitional period in which the movement is not gradual or smooth, but swings erratically back and forth between the two poles. This complicates the case of identity problem where individuals affected by Western influences can no longer determine whether their identity is more a derivative of the past or the direct result of the immediate or present factors. This leaves them rootless and unable to project themselves easily into the future. The problem is of course more acute in urban areas and among the younger Western educated generation.

There is a divergent movement away from the original core of traditional Iranian culture, but also, surprisingly, a convergent movement, wherein the message of the West has led to the emergence of a rising middle class with similar desires and goals. This convergence has also led to an adoption of Western standards in way of life such as in manner of

dress, food habits and urban apartment type living, and therefore to a higher degree of conformity than has ever before existed. It has led to the assimilation of minority and tribal groups into urban life and to weakening of resistance of the Western invasion. Finally it can be seen in the emergence of Western languages, particularly English, as a vehicle for films, radio, TV, and in tourism, due to the desire to Western oriented groups to find easier access to Western culture.

Now it seems appropriate to mention a number of social and linguistic elements which are currently playing a role in furthering the development of a modern national literature:

1. The Persian language with its tremendous potentiality for coining new vocabulary, in spite of its illogical orthographic system, is relatively simple both grammatically and structurally. The work of the Iranian Academy in introducing new Persian equivalents for foreign concepts and technical terminology should be counted.

2. The White Revolution of 1963 changed the structure of Iranian society and gave land to the farmers (60% of the total population). It also allowed workers to have shares in government and private companies and factories. During this period the number of people in school was increased by nine million, which has not only increased functional literacy, but has made literature accessible to a group which will constitute a majority in ten years time. As this group is not aristocratic or upper class, Iranian writers are finding themselves obliged to address a new kind of audience and put their "salon" language aside, preferring a new colloquial and even slang idiom, which can reach the new reading public.

3. The recent expansion of network of mass media to the point where it now reaches all over the country has obviously had a profound influence, particularly on rural and provincial populations.

4. The existence of a national poetry which is known to Iranians on all levels of society is a solid foundation on which to build a modern literature. There is hardly an Iranian to be found, literate or otherwise, who is not familiar with his own national epic, Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*.

From what we have presented, it can be concluded that a "strong" sense of national identity exists among the following groups:

farmers and people who live in villages and small provincial cities, those who still have strong ties with the extended family, people who have strong religious faith and carry out the rituals of their religion and observe national holidays and participate in patriotic ceremonies, those who are involved with the Persian language and are steeped in Iranian literature, both classical and modern, artists, writers, musicians and architects who have gone deeply into the roots of Western civilization and have consciously rejected what is unsuitable in the Iranian context.

A sense of national identity is weak, or lacking, among the following groups: young people who are fascinated with Western technology as a means of pleasure seeking (fascination with cars, gadgets, etc.), *Nouveaux riches* groups who send their children to bilingual schools and are more interested in educating their children in technological fields than in the humanities; people with little interest in religion, family life and their Iranian heritage; those who

have been strongly influenced by other ideologies such as international or socialistic movements.

Before examining the literary aspects of modern Persian prose literature, it is necessary to delimit the period covered by the works to be discussed and to cite the writers we have selected. We have chosen sixteen Iranian writers who lived and wrote between the two Iranian revolutions, namely the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and the White Revolution of 1963. These writers and their works are listed chronologically as follows:

1. Mirza Malkom Khan – *The Oracular Notebook or The Book of Organization*, Tehran, 1948.
2. Abdul Rahim Talibuff, *Ahmad's Book or The Telibul Vessell*, Istanbul, 1894.
3. Haji Zayn'l – Abidin of Maragheh – *The Travel Diary of Ibrahim Beg*, Cairo, 1903.
4. Mirza Habib Isfahani, *The Adventures of Haji Babu of Isphahan*, (Trans. by James Morier), Calcutta, 1905.
5. Ali Akbar Dihkhuda, *Balderdash*, Tehran, 1907.
6. Mortiza Mushfiq Kazimi, *The Horrors of Tehran*, Tehran 1961.
7. Jahangir Jalili, *I Cried Too*, Tehran 1933.
8. Muhammad Mas'ud, *Flowers Grow in Hell*, Tehran 1942 and *Night Diversions*, Tehran 1941-42.
9. Ali Dashti, *Prison Days*, Tehran and, *Fitna* Tehran, 1943, and *A Portrait of Hafiz*, Tehran 1957.
10. Muhammad Hijazi, "A Biography of a Great Philosopher" (from *Mirror*) Tehran 1932 and *Love's Nest* Tehran 1964.
11. Muhammad Ali Jamalzade, "Everyman to his Deserts"

(from *Once Upon a Time*) Berlin 1921.

12. Sadiq Hidayat, "Haji Murad" (from *Buried Alive*), Tehran 1930, *The Patient Stone*, Tehran, and *The Message of Kafka*, Tehran 1958, *Blind Owl* (The Recluse), Tehran 1952.

13. Buzurg Alavi, "The Leader Soldier" (from Portman-teau), Tehran, 1934 and *Her Eyes*, Tehran 1952.

14. Jalal Ali Ahmed, "Mobilizing the People" (from *The Exchange of Visits*), *The Headmaster*, Tehran 1958, *Western Hysteria* 1952.

15. Sadiq Chubak, "Monsieur Ilyas" (from *The Puppet Show*), Tehran 1945, and *Natives of Tangistan*, Tehran 1960.

16. Ali Muhammad Afghani, *Mrs. Ahu's Husband*, Tehran 1961.

The themes deal largely with the problems discussed in the earlier part of the paper and are grouped into five categories. (Note: The numbers in parentheses refer to the list of writers cited above.)

1. Iranian awareness of Western advancement in technology and regret at its lagging.

The Oracular Notebook (No.1), *To Capture Western Civilization*, S.F. Shademan (not included in the list).

The Ahmad Book (No. 2), *The Travel Diary of Ibrahim Beg* (No. 3), *Balderdash* (No. 5), *Prison Days* (No. 9)

2. New freedom of women to associate with the opposite sex. It led to the appearance of a new novel form similar to the *belle Nouvelle*, which had its roots in Persian lyricism and sentimentality, but is completely European in technique.

I Cried Too, (No. 7), *Caravan of Love*, *Night Diversion* (No. 8), *Fitna* (No. 9), *Love's Nest*, *Homa*, *Parvana*, *Parichehr*, *Ziba*, *Sereshk*⁴ (No. 10). all girls names, *Mrs. Ahu's Husband* (No.

17). *The Story of Naz* (No. 12).

3. Desire of writers to preserve Iranian national identity, to prevent it from being damaged or eradicated by the colossal power of the West.

To Capture Western Civilization, S.F. Shademan, *Flowers Grow in Hell* (No. 8), *Once Upon a Time* (No. 11), *The French Prisoner of War*, *The Puppet Behind the Curtain*, *The Don Juan of Karaj* (all No. 12), *Western Hysteria*, *Mobilizing the People* (No. 15), *Persian Is Sugar* (No. 11), *Sereshk* (No. 10).

4 Expression of patriotism and glorification of the past in historical novels and re-interpretations of the past in the language of the common people.

An Excursion into the Poems of Shams (No. 9), *The Fire Worshipper*, *Mongol Shadow*, *Non-Iranian*, *The Throae of Abu-Nasr*, *The Dictionary of the Academy*, *Parvin*, *Sasan's Daughter*, *Mazyar*, *Isfahan*, *Half the World*, *Khayyam in Quatrains; Folklore*, *The Culture of the Masses*, *The Book of the Deeds of Ardeshir Bapakan* (all No. 12). (Four historical writers are not included: M.B. Khusruvi, Sh. M. Nathri, H. Badi and San'atizadeh).

5. Critical-satirical prose works analyzing the follies and evils in Persian society, government and in foreign powers:

James Morier's translation of *Haji Baba of Isphahan* (No. 4), *The Ethics of Nobles*, *Ubayd i Zakani*, *Horrible Tehran*, M.Kazimi (deals with the unfair practices against Persian women in the early 1620's), *The Noblest of Creatures*⁵ (No. 8) *Everyman to the Deserts*,⁶ *Lunatic Asylum*,⁷ *Plain of Resurrection* (No. 11), *The Man who Wore a Smart Overcoat* (No. 14).

With regard to language and technique, the modern Persian novel has played an important role in creating

links among diverse elements in the society. As mentioned before, in the early twentieth century, authors began to address the new middle class requiring the use of a more colloquial type of language. Also the new realistic and naturalistic subject matter required new stylistic techniques and experiments in form, as the pre-constitutional prose literature had been largely lyric or Romantic in style.

The experimental European novel was influential, but Iranian writers tended to adopt only realistic and naturalistic techniques, taking very little from European Symbolism or Surrealism. D.S. Komissarov, the Russian orientalist, has analyzed *Parvin* and *Sereshk* by Hijazi. He believes that Hijazi wrote under the influence of Zola and that there is a surprising similarity between *Parvin* and *Therese Raquin*. Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951) for example, drew on the "Novella" tradition harking back to Boccaccio with picaresque elements which are also found in Sadeq Chubak's "The Baboon Whose Buffoon Was Dead", with its rascal character who lives by his wits.

The Persian novel also shows the influences of the eighteenth century English novel such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Fieldings *Tom Jones* with its focus on survival of the fittest. Traces of Scott, Emily Bronte, Poe, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner and even Saul Bellow are there as well. Hijazi's and Jamalzadeh's works can be labelled "novels of the educated". Jamalzadeh, incidentally, was the first Iranian writer to introduce modern short story technique into Persian prose.

The gradual development of Hedayat's interest in a variety of themes – humanitarianism, nationalism, sympathy with the lower classes and even animals – led him to absurdity.

Sometimes his subject matter becomes the gradual unfolding of the protagonist's mind and character, bringing him to a recognition of his own identity.

The regional novel was introduced into Persian by both Chubak and Hedayat. The setting, customs, manners and vernacular of a particular locality are emphasized, not merely as "local color", but similar to their use in Hardy and Faulkner. Although Chubak's *Tangesir* is rich in local color, Chubak is also an expressionist and a symbolist with an eye for cinematic techniques.

Hedayat's role in reflecting a sense of national identity has been multi-functional: his love for Iran, its past and present cultures, brought him to the point of chauvinism. In his early literary career he wrote *Rubaiyat i Hakim Umar Khayyam*, *Mongol Shadow* (1931) and *Maziyar* (1933). He was perhaps one of the pioneers in recognizing the importance of folklore in the framework of Iranian culture. *Usana* is a collection of local songs and a source of ancient Iranian beliefs in which there are references to Dinkard and Bundehishn. He dealt with the Iranian revolt against the Arab and Mongol invasions in several works of which *Mongol Shadow* is the most significant. *Mongol Shadow* is the story of an Iranian warrior, Shahrukh, who fights against Mongols and Arabs. His fiancée is killed in a brutal and barbaric way. Shahrukh promises to avenge her. He kills a group of Mongols. The following year peasants find the corpse of Shahrukh in the hollow of a tree trunk, smiling victoriously. An elderly peasant urges his young friend to flee, saying "... let us go, that is the shadow of the Mongol!"

The last smile is a fictive account of a confrontation

between Iranians and the Caliph, Harun'l Rashid. *The Fire Worshipper* is based upon the memories of a French painter who watches Zoroastrians praying at Naqshe Rostam and becomes so fascinated that loses control and kneels to worship fire with the rest. In "Dash Akol", Hedayat tries to demonstrate the sentimentality and tenderness in a class (the "*Kolah makhmali*" or "velvet hats"), which is in some ways akin to the "mafiosa". By familiarizing other social groups with his previously mysterious and misunderstood type, Hedayat has been instrumental in creating links among diverse social elements.

At this point it can only be stated that literature has acted as a means of creating national consciousness either by bringing awareness of the past and the cultural heritage or by revealing the danger of the attack of the Western Technology. It is also a statement of fact that Persian identity has demonstrated a power to withstand forceful attacks three times in 23 centuries.

From a superficial consideration of what we have presented, it may appear that modern Persian prose literature has primarily a didactic function of awakening national consciousness. This is in part true, but writers like Ale Ahmad, Jamalzadeh and Hedayat were artists first and foremost with a need to express themselves artistically while supersede any desire to preach or didacticize. To forget this would do the modern generation of Persian writers a grave injustice.

FOOTNOTES

1. Sociologists are mainly concerned with what is called

cultural identity, rather than national identity; the former has more of a political implication, whereas the latter has social connotations and deals with the past and traditions of a people who have common interests and ties.

2- The present riots in different corners of the world, particularly in Northern Ireland and in Lebanon, prove the contrary. One has to bear in mind that religious ties are not by themselves independent of other factors, but are always interwoven with political involvements.

3. Wolfgang Iser, *Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction From Bunyan to Beckett*, John Hopkins University Press, 1970. 27, 122, 143.

4. In this novel Hijazi reflects the morals of American society which is governed by eroticism, leading men to complete nervous disorder and crime. Hijazi criticizes the "Horrors" that films and newspapers produce.

5. Mas'ud says: In this chaotic, confused world everyone has opened his jaws to gulp another down, one's teeth kept sharp to tear another into pieces.

6. Fate takes a European bath-attendant to Persia where he becomes adviser to a minister.

7. The author criticizes the conditions in a society in which sensitive people prefer to take refuge in an asylum rather than remain at large in the outside world (a Persian version of the contemporary bestseller *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*).