

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Literary Voices

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/08z7j40v>

Author

Rahimieh, N

Publication Date

2020-05-12

Peer reviewed

Literary Voices

The history of modern Persian literature is closely aligned with some of the oppositional movements that culminated in the 1979 revolution. The origins of modern Persian writing are inseparable from a concern that literature speak to the concerns of the masses. Mohamad Ali Jamalzadeh, the reputed father of modern Persian prose, was of the first and most influential advocates of this view to overcome the elitist language and style of early twentieth-century literature. This move to make literature accessible to the masses revolutionized literary expression and form in both prose and poetry. The political fate of the nation, her apparent near domination by outside powers, provided an equally strong impetus to those who saw literature as a means to national awakening. The preoccupation with the intersection of politics and writing is reflected in the first Iranian Writers Congress held at Tehran's Soviet Cultural Institute on June 25, 1946. The need for change in literary form and sensitivity to the population at large were discussed and debated, as was the desire to depict Iran's new social and political realities.

The anti-colonial and national independence movements of the 1960s that fueled the concept of *engagé* literature influenced the Iranian literary scene and led to a home-grown literature of commitment. Many Iranian writers viewed themselves as mouthpieces for their oppressed compatriots and used their writing as a vehicle for expressing social, cultural, and political problems that beset their nation. Not surprisingly the most outspoken literary voices of the pre-revolutionary era were treated with reverence by oppositional forces and with suspicion by the monarchy and the secret police. The stories of imprisonment, censorship, and intimidation associated with major

literary figures made them into heroic revolutionaries. This history is occasionally mapped onto the contemporary cultural scene. For instance, a major thoroughfare in Tehran is named after the writer and social activist Jalal Al-e Ahmad whose 1962 treatise translated as *Occidentosis* or *Westitis* (*gharbzadegi*) decried Iran's cultural dependency on the West.

Such examples notwithstanding, the Islamic Republic's relationship to writers has not been radically different from the pre-revolutionary era. The attempt to revamp Iranian culture and make cultural expression conform to Islamic values and ideals gave rise to new guidelines for the publishing industry, while by and large leaving intact the censorship mechanisms that had been applied to the publishing industry.

There are some obvious thematic overlaps between literature written before and after the revolution. The Iran-Iraq war, the closure of the universities, the overall political clamp-down of the war years drove many writers to exile. Yet many remained in Iran and continued to find forms of creative expression and to maintain a place of prominence in Iranian cultural life. New figures and voices also emerged after the revolution.

The most immediate discernable shift was the emergence of a literature devoted to the ideals that underwrote the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The earlier leftist leanings were replaced in these new forms of literary expression with adulation for Shi'ite and Islamic beliefs.

The eight-year war between Iran and Iraq also led to the emergence of a literature of war. Ranging between personal testimonials, short stories, and novellas this literature spoke to the experiences of a large number of young Iranians and captured the harsh

realities of a devastating war with whose aftermath Iran continues to grapple. Long after the end of the hostilities in 1988, its reflections can be found in Persian literature. Davud Ghaffarzadegan is among the prominent writers today whose prose works bear witness to the war's psychological impact.

The most remarkable observable change in Persian literature after the revolution is the increasing presence of women writers. More than any other time in Iranian history, large numbers of women have entered the literary arena. Even more importantly, they have contributed to the introduction of new forms of writing. Writers like Shahnush Parsipur and Moniru Ravanipur were among early trend setters who experimented with postmodern forms of writing. Along with their male counterparts they also adapted the concept of magical realism to the Persian idiom and explored new ways of situating women's lot within the currents of Persian literature.

Women novelists are also at the forefront of reviving realist explorations of history. The unprecedented popularity of the novel *Bamdad-i Khomar (Drunkard Morning)* by Fattanih Haj Seyyed Javadi, first published in 1998, marked a turning point in women's literary production and its widespread reception among Iranian readership. The novel demonstrates that hardships faced by women do not necessarily and exclusively stem from inequality of the sexes before the law, but rather by social, economic and cultural values that have been deeply ingrained in Iranian history.

Numerous other women writers, representing a vibrant new generation, have added their voices to contemporary Persian literature. In addition to reaching a much larger readership, these writers have become recipients of literary prizes. Zoya Pirzad, Fariba Vafi, and Parinush Sani'i are among Iran's most read and celebrated novelists

today. Their art is marked by a new sensitivity to the lives of ordinary women and their means of coping with daily demands of family and work. Their protagonists are not extraordinary beings or heroic types of the 1960s and 70s and bear witness to a turn away from the almost didactic focus of engagé writing.

Contemporary Persian Literature would seem to have moved beyond the focus on educating and liberating the masses. In a dramatic departure from the past, the writer does not see herself or himself primarily or exclusively as a social or political activist. The current trends in Persian literature indicate that the experiments with writing in the early twentieth century have indeed borne fruit, making literature both accessible and popular among the population at large.