

## How Modern Persian Poetry Got Modern A Review of Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak's *Recasting Persian Poetry*

At American universities in the 1980s and 1990s, a generation of Iranian-born teacher-scholars who combined undergraduate training in Iran, self-study mastery of Persian literature, and American graduate study in English or Comparative Literature energized the field of Persian literature study in America, among them Leonardo P. Alishan at The University of Utah, Hamid Dabashi at Columbia University (a slightly different case because of his graduate training in Sociology) M.R. Ghanoonparvar at The University of Texas, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak at The University of Washington, and Farzaneh Milani at The University of Virginia. This generation of Persianists brought something new to Persian Studies discourse: acquaintance with discipline-oriented theory and its application to the critical appreciation of Iranian literary works, figures, and periods. Their work ranges from creative writing, as in Alishan's collection of poems called *Dancing Barefoot on Broken Glass* (1991), and translation, as in Ghanoonparvar's versions of such classic Iranian fictions as Sadeq Chubak's *The Patient Stone* (1990) and Simin Daneshvar's *Savooshoon* (1990), to Milani's *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (1992) with its feminist underpinnings, and Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak's *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Modernity in Persian Poetry* (1996), a monograph on "the process of literary change" (p. 1).

Karimi-Hakkak grounded *Recasting Persian Poetry* "in the views of two literary theorists who . . . have contributed significantly to our understanding of literary change. Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical principle and Yuri Lotman's diachronic principal form the twin theoretical foundations on which I have based much of my argument" (p. 9). That argument seeks to demonstrate the falsity of "the tendency in traditional literary scholarship on the subject to speak of modern Persian poetry as the result of a sharp break with the past" (p. 1).

To that end, Karimi-Hakkak examines the course of Persian poetry and Iranian views on Persian poetry from Qâ'âni (ca. 1808-1853/4) to Nimâ Yushij (1895-1960). He reviews pertinent writings and views of Fath'ali Âkhondzâdeh (1812-1878), Mirzâ Âqâ Khân Kermâni (1854-1896), Mirzâ Malcolm Khân (1833-1908), 'Ali Akbar Dehkhodâ (1880-1955), Mohammad Taqi Bahâr (1880-1951) and Taqi Raf'at (1889-1920), which, along with poems not part of the modernist movement associated with Nimâ Yushij, "had introduced many principles of a new system of poetic expression" into Persian literary culture (p. 233).

As for such poems, Karimi-Hakkak provides upwards of a hundred pages of useful readings of ten poems which exhibit gradually increasing differences from classical and strictly traditionalist poetic practice, culminating in Nimâ'ic modernism. Those texts are: Dehkhodâ's "Yâd Âr . . ." [Remember . . .], "Payâm-e Âzâdi" [Message of Freedom] by Abolqâsem 'Âref Qazvini (1882-1934), Bahâr's "Ranj-o Ganj" [Toil and Treasure], "Qalb-e Mâdar" [A Mother's Heart] by Iraj Mirzâ (1874-1926), "Julâ-ye Khodâ" [God's Weaver] by Parvin E'tesâmi (1907-1941), "Beh Dokhtarân-e Irân" [To the Daughters of Iran] by Abolqâsem Lâhuti (1887-1957), Raf'at's "Nowruz va Dehqân" [Nowruz and the Farmer], "Seh Tâblow" [The Three Tableaux] by Mohammad Rezâ Mirzâzâdeh 'Eshqi (1894-1924), and Nimâ Yushij's "Omid-e Palid" [Filthy Hope], "Morgh-e Âmin" [The Amen Bird] (1952), and "Kâr-e Shab-pâ" [The Nightwatchman's Work].

These readings, the analysis of Iranian poetic trends and views from Qâ'âni to Nimâ Yushij, and the engagement of theoretical notions of Bakhtin and Lotman make *Recasting Persian Poetry* good reading. However, some readers may come away from the book feeling that Karimi-Hakkak may not have made a convincing case because of the issue of definitions.

In the opening pages of *Recasting Persian Poetry*, the author refers more than thirty times to "modern Persian poetry," "modernism in Persian poetry," "modernity in Persian poetry," "new Persian poetry," "the concept of poetic modernity," "the notion of modernity," and "modernist poets" (pp. 1-6). What he calls "new" and "modern" and "modernist" in pre-World War II Persian poetry, he contrasts with "classical," "old," and "traditional" Persian poetry. But he neither defines the terms "modern" and "modernist" nor necessarily means by them what literary critics generally mean in labeling a literary work "modernist."

Now, Iranian and foreign critics routinely label such writing as Nimâ Yushij's more famous poems and Sâdeq Hedâyat's *Buf-e Kur* [(The) The Blind Owl] (1937) as modernist. Critics mean at least three things by such labelling. Some critics use the term "modernism" as if synonymous with modernization. Second, critics use the term "modernist" with respect to Persian literary works to contrast them with "traditional(ist)" Persian literature. M.A. Jamâlzâdeh's *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* [Once upon a Time] (1922), Iran's first collection of short stories, illustrates this sense of "modernism" in its "Preface," which calls for a new literature in a new language for new aims, and in its six stories, which were unprecedented narratives in Persian. Karimi-Hakkak's pairing of "old" and "new" and linking such poets as Dehkhodâ, Bahâr, and E'tesâmi with the "new" would seem to reflect this second use of the terms "modern" and "modernism."

Third, the term "modernist" is also applied to such writers as Yushij and Hedâyat in referencing several discrete movements, views, and styles in literature around the world, either deriving from specific realities and reactions in Europe during the first three decades of the century or relating to analogous events and circumstances elsewhere. For example, if the facts of World War I shook the confidence of European intellectuals in their previous belief in human progress and European civilization and led some of those intellectuals to modernist positions, in a country such as Iran the facts of culture-specific patriarchy and Western dominance shook the confidence of Iranian intellectuals in their previous belief in the special validity of Iranian civilization, leading them to a sort of modernist philosophical stance.

Narrowly defined, "modernism" denotes a multifaceted phenomenon in European and American literatures dating from the early years of the twentieth century into the 1930s. Critics point to such works as Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903), Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo* (1904), Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915), James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) as examples of literary modernism in novels in the English language. Katherine Mansfield's short stories can illustrate the modernist trend in shorter prose fiction. In lyric verse, William Butler Yeats and T. S. Eliot are held to best represent Modernism, with such poems as Yeats's "The Second Coming," "Leda and the Swan," and "Sailing to Byzantium" and Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1942) considered modernist classics. In literary criticism, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1929) by Robert Graves and Laura Riding is an early landmark, modernist work. In general, the sorts of critical responses to literary texts later called "The New Criticism" are thought to have a special relationship with Modernism.

As such cited works intimate, the term "modernism" does not refer to or define a single approach or style. Typical of modernist writing are emphases which deserve the designations impressionist, imagist, and symbolist. Philosophical orientations on the part of modernist writers can run a gamut as well. However, critics generally assume that literary modernism resulted from a special complex of conditions existing at the end of the nineteenth century through and following World War I. A felt need to react to Victorianism, new appreciation of the human psyche inspired by the works by Sigmund Freud, the horrors of World War I, and a host of other factors stimulated literary modernism in literature in the English language.

In an essay called "The Idea of the Modern" (1967), Irving Howe (d. 1994) characterizes what he sees as "a special kind of literature . . . we have had . . . in the last hundred years." He calls this literature "modern" in reference to its distinctive "sensibility and style" in contrast with "contemporary" which "refers to time." According to Howe, "modernism" is unprecedented. As for when it occurred, Howe points to Virginia Woolf's famous statement, "On or about December 1910 human nature changed." According to Howe, "Through this vivid hyperbole, Virginia Woolf meant to suggest that there is a frightening discontinuity between the traditional past and the shaken present; that the line of history has been bent, perhaps broken." Howe observes: "The past was devoted to answers; the modern period confines itself to questions."

Everyone agrees that Persian Iranian literary sensibilities and styles exhibited significant changes by mid-twentieth century after a millennium in which traditional modes, forms, topics, and the like held sway and that, in Karimi-Hakkak's words, a new "network of socially instituted esthetic agreements" came into being. Factors accounting for the changes that took place in Persian literature, signaled by the publication of such works as Nimâ Yushij's poem called *Afsâneh* [Myth] (1922), may have differed from factors which accounted for modernism to come to the literary fore in the West. But the fact of the appearance of the modern in Persian literature alongside traditionalist Persian writing—

which is still alive and well in Iran and America today—is indisputable. And because many Iranian writers presumably thought they had nowhere else to go than to Western writing contemporary to them for inspiration in dealing with their sense that they needed to do literary things differently, such writers as Yushij and Hedâyat (1903-1951) appear to have accepted modernist premises from Western authors, whether or not they personally experienced the causes for the rise of those premises in the West.

Howe devotes more than half of his essay to a list of "topics concerning the formal or literary attributes of modernism." They are: (1) "The Rise of the Avant-Garde as a Special Caste"; (2) "The Problem of Belief Becomes Exacerbated, Sometimes to the Point of Dismissal"; (3) "A Central Direction in Modernist Literature is Toward the Self-Sufficiency of the Work"; (4) "The Idea of Esthetic Order Is Abandoned or Radically Modified"; (5) "Nature Ceases to Be a Central Subject and Setting of Literature"; (6) "Perversity—Which Is to Say: Surprise, Excitement, Shock, Terror Affront—Becomes a Dominant Motif"; (7) "Primitivism Becomes a Major Terminus of Modernist Writing"; (8) "In the Novel There Appears a Whole New Sense of Character, Structure and the Role of the Protagonist or Hero;" and (9) "Nihilism Becomes the Central Preoccupation, the Inner Demon, at the Heart of Modern Literature."

In these terms, many readers may not think verse compositions by Dehkoḥdâ, 'Âref Qazvini, Bahâr, Iraj Mirzâ, E'tesâmi, Lâhuti, Raf'at, and 'Eshqi "modernist," even though they exhibit "newness" in comparison with earlier "traditional(ist)" and "classical" Persian poems. In other words, critics who think that Nimâ Yushij's poetry constituted a dramatic break from the past in its "modernism" may be right if they mean by Modernism what Howe means (or as the term is described in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* or *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* or in most literary critical writing dealing with the phenomenon). If, however, readers and critics think that Nimâ Yushij "fathered" new poetic discourse or did not draw from his immediate Persian past and environment or did not ground his poetry in the tradition of Persian poetry, they are as wrong as Karimi-Hakkak argues they are.

The "they" here, among them "Nimâ's followers," were responsible, according to Karimi-Hakkak, for a "binary opposition . . . set up in the 1950s and 1960s" between "she'r-e now" [new poetry] and "she'r-e sonnati" [traditional poetry] which "still remains operative as a basis for the classification of poetry in contemporary Iran." Karimi-Hakkak continues: "The difference between the new poetry and its opposite is usually related to two characteristics. First, the new poetry is said to differ from the old in that it no longer follows the rigid formal rules and generic divisions of the classical poetry or of the contemporary practice modeled on it. The apparent unevenness of poetic lines on the page and the irregularity of the rhyme and meter that make the new poetry visibly and audibly different from the classical models render it conceptually opposed to them. Second, it is widely believed that the new poetry relates to its social context in ways significantly different from the way the classical poetic canon does. Typically, modern poetry is viewed as that which demonstrates its willingness to address important social and political issues, while classical poetry is not. This binary system of differentiation has distorted our view of the process of poetic change in modern Iran" (pp. 2-3).

While agreeing that such distortion figures in views about the process of poetic change in contemporary Iran, I have the impression that mainstream critics there—for example, Rezâ Barâheni and Hushang Golshiri—from the 1960s onward evidence much greater sophistication than author Karimi-Hakkak suggests. First, such critics related the difference between new poetry and its opposite to at least four, not two, characteristics. A third was simply diction. Words and images which traditional(ist) poets, critics, and readers considered beyond the realm of "poetic diction" figured in modernist poetry whose creators and readers did not adhere to a notion of rhetorical continuity or the existence of a "poetic diction." Words became poetic because of their use in poems, not because of some quality inhering in them.

A fourth characteristic had to do with the notion of individuality, as Karl Weintraub discusses the terms in *Value of the Individual* (1978), and the individual perspective of the lyric speaker as a result of the sense on the part of modernist poets and readers metaphysical and epistemological continuity with the Iranian past no longer existed.

As for expectations of readers and critics with respect to *ta'ahhod-e adabi* [literary commitment] on the part of poets and social and political uses and interpretations of poetic texts, I think such tendencies usually hint at a limit to the modernist orientations of writers and critics, rather than signal their wholehearted modernity. In any case, engag  views have neither marred the best poems by the best modernist poets nor wholly vitiated the critical writing of the best

critics. Moreover, in the Islamic Republican Era, partly as a result of the recognition by secular-minded, engagé literary intellectuals that their Pahlavi-era social and political commitment was a wrong-headed failure, critics and readers in Iran today appear to recognize that sociological content or intent has no direct bearing on the appeal of a lyric poem qua poetry. As a corollary, all along in modernist Persian poetry, poets and readers have recognized another difference between modernist and traditional(ist) Persian poetry: the lack of necessary didacticism in the former (if a modernist knows few answers and creates art with questions, how or what would he or she teach?), and its ubiquitousness in the latter.

Consequently, if readers see assumptions about the existence and nature of God, patriotism and citizenship, individual and social ethics, traditional imagery, and unindividuated speakers in lyric verse by Iranian poets in the first half of the twentieth century to whom Karimi-Hakkak gives credit for helping to "modernize" Iranian poetic discourse, we can understand the conclusion that those readers might reach to the effect that such poets and poems may have brought something new to Persian poetry, but that their newness may not deserve the label "modern" or "modernist."

The foregoing several paragraphs should not be read as criticism of *Recasting Persian Poetry*, but rather as an illustration of the engaging dialogue which Karimi-Hakkak's forcefully articulated thesis should create between his views and those of readers who take his views seriously.

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