

The Constitutional Movement and its Impact on Persian Poetry

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Abstract

The constitutional movement of Iran, provided an excellent opportunity to the Persian poets to introduce the Persian poetry to new heights.

The poets having original ideas, creative minds and innovative thoughts introduced breezy themes and changed the furrowed face of Persian literature. Issues like nationalism, political concerns, social tribulations, human rights, emphasis on education, rule of law and freedom of thought brushed aside the centuries old dust. Some legendary poets like Bahar, Eshqi, Farrokhi, Iraj, Arif and Parvin played their role to perfection.

In pre-constitutional movement era, in Afshar, Zand and Qajar periods, the main themes of the Persian poetry were quite limited and most of the poets were busy in paying mere tributes to the kings and ruling elite. The poets and writers had nothing new to offer. The purported intellectuals were in fact the meager followers of the great poets of magnificent past. To some critics, literature of this era belongs to the Revivalist Movement.(1) Because the ideology and imagery of this era's poetry is the true copy of the literature of 11th and 12th century AD. These poets were unable to produce even minor differences in style and structure.(2) Some critics hesitate to call it a literary movement or school of thought.(3) To them, the poets of

this age spoiled the natural evolutionary process and produced hurdles in developing new themes. Moreover, they pushed back the Persian literature, especially the magical poetry to the darkness of past and do not deserve admiration. If the whole poetry of Znad and Qajar periods be waived or erased from the history of Persian literature, nothing would be lost because the original script would remain untouched in the form of Divan-e-Unsari, Amir Moe'zzi, Manuchehri, Sa'di and Hafiz etc.(4)

However, this point of view is also not quite realistic. These poets, at least, paved the way of change and brought formal language closer to slang and colloquial. Undoubtedly, the constitutional movement was a milestone in the journey of bringing revolutionary changes in Persian literature. It needs not to be mentioned that a group of historians and intellectuals have some serious doubts about the objectives of constitutional movement and specifically its impact on literature and they never call it a revolution. Despite all these ideological differences, there is consensus that the political anarchy brought some meaningful changes in the field of literature. But unfortunately these changes were not deep rooted and the literature could not move forward along with the drastic political and social developments.(5)

It is also a fact that despite all sort of weaknesses the constitutional movement changed the fabric of Iranian civil society. It must not be forgotten that the cultural and social norms do not influence literature fortnightly.(6) So, keeping all these aspects in view, the poetry of this era must be analyzed properly and its future impact be studied in depth.

Some literary pundits are of the view that poetry of this era has resemblance to popular journalism.(7) But another view point is that some grass root level poets emerged and interestingly most of them were less educated. It was for the very first time in the history of Persian literature that common people felt their presence in poetry.(8) Another critic says that the poets of the post-constitutional movement era were extremely committed. They strived hard to change the fabric of civil society and the services rendered by them are really commendable.(9)

The impact of constitutional movement on Persian poetry was undoubtedly

more than one could expect. Some untouched topics and themes e.g. freedom of thought, democracy, nationalism, women rights, industrial development in Europe, social criticism, distance from religious thoughts and mysticism were introduced.

Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub while analyzing the poetry of Iraj Mirza, one of the most popular poets of constitutional era, has described the main themes of constitutional poetry as follow:(10)

- Political awareness
- Social problems
- Criticism on women's Hejab (Veil)
- Emphasis on education of youth
- Women's role in national development
- Primary and secondary education.
- Extreme love towards motherhood
- Patriotism
- Strong criticism on old customs

Mohammad Reza Shafi'ee Kadkani has also evaluated the constitutional poetry in detail and mentioned the main themes of this era as follow: (11)

- Nationalism.
- Freedom of thought
- Rule of law
- Cultural development
- Modern education
- Equality of men and women
- Criticism on social traditions
- Criticism on some religious customs and sometimes on religion itself

Analyzing the works of mainstream poets of the constitutional movement, the fundamental subjective change and ideological evolution is being focused in the following.

Nationalism

In the past, there was no tendency to speak frequently about love and affection towards homeland or nationalism. The modern concept of homeland or motherland developed after the great French revolution. For

most of the Persian poets of earlier or middle age, the concept of homeland was quite dismal. Mostly they used to speak about some village or city as their birthplace. Some ideological poets used to consider the entire Islamic world as their homeland. Allama Muhammad Iqbal is the best example of such giant intellectuals. He is the greatest messenger of Islamic unity and Pan Islamism.(12)

The concept of patriotism was introduced for the first time in Persian poetry.(13) Although the reflection of this ideology was not uniformed.(14) Sayyed Ashraf Gilani (Nasim Shomal) speaks about a true Islamic Shia state.(15) Whereas, Mirzada Eshqi is wondering for the Iran in its purest form. Like many other romantic progressive intellectuals, he is looking for the Iran of Sassanide period. His anti Arab stance is quite evident.(16) Although, he belonged to the family of the holy Prophet (PBUH). While the other Sayyed, Nasim Shomal, admires the Prophet and does not condemn the Arab invaders.

The bitter and hard tone of nationalism could be heard with grandeur in the poetry of Farrokhi Yazdi(17), Mirzada Eshqi(18), Arif Qazvini(19) and Allama Mohammad Taqi Bahar.(20)

Freedom and Liberty

The word "Aazadi" in the meanings of freedom and liberty came to the Persian poetry with the constitutional movement. Earlier, no such word closer to western democracy was known to Persian people.(21) Actually the great French revolution (1789 AD) and the British industrial revolution (After 1750 AD) influenced the whole world including Iran. Although the word Aazadi was used frequently in classical poetry but it never reflected the sense of human rights, legal and constitutional government and freedom of thought. The intimacy and acquaintance with Europe developed these concepts in the east.(22)

Until the reign of Safavids, the Persian people knew little about the Western world. Some of them got familiar with Europeans in the sub-continent. Hazin Lahiji (1103-1181 AH), the famous poet of later Safavid period, who also came to the sub-continent, paid attention to this

issue.(23) Later, Abdul Latif Shushtari in his book, "Tohfatal Aalam", and Mirza Abu Talib in his travelogue, "Masir-e-Talibi" explained the life style of British people. The idea of political freedom came to Iran under the indirect influence of sub-continent, U.S.S.R. and Ottoman empire of Turkey.(24)

In the meanwhile, Miraza Fateh Ali Aakhondzadeh (1295 AH), prominent writer and critic; Mirza Malkam Khan (1249-1326 AH), politician; and Sayyed Jamal-ud-Din (1254-1315 AH), political legend and social reformer, tried to establish the principles of democracy. Moreover, it was due to their untiring and selfless efforts that the Iranian civil society changed to a great extent.

Qaem Moqam Farahani and Fateh Ullah Shibani were the forerunners of freedom of speech. The roar and echo of their emotional stance is heard in the literary works of Adib-ul-Momalik, Nasim Shomal, Ali Akbar Dehkhoda and Allama Mohammad Taqi Bahar. The most prominent and popular examples of patriotism and freedom could be seen in the poetry of Bahar.(25) Although poets like Arif Qazvini(26), Mirzada Eshqi(27) and Farrokhi Yazdi(28) also played pivotal role in developing the pressure from the civil society. Even some social poets like Iraj Mirza(29) and Parvin E'tesami(30) were not far behind in this race.

Unfortunately, during the dictatorial rule of Reza Khan, harsh censorship, social restrictions and political suppression exaggerated such emotions.

Human Rights and Political Criticism

The Persian literature had never experienced such nasty, hostile style which became the hall mark of this era's poetry. According to Arif Qazvini, the renowned poet of this age, it was nothing less than a revolution. These poets wanted to eliminate the pungent past and had the desire to bring new ideas. Their ultimate destination was the revival of human rights.(31) But again it was Bahar, the most innovative and creative poet of this age, who came out with original and salubrious ideas.(32)

Mirzada Eshqi is the other eminent agitator poet who condemned the

dictatorial and dogmatic regime and sacrificed even his life in the due course.³²

Farrokhi Yazdi is another legendary literary figure whose mouth was sewed at the orders of Zaigham-ud-Daula Qashqai, the governor of Yazd, which really exposed the cruelty and autocracy of that regime. Farrokhi used to call himself the "Lover of Freedom".⁽³³⁾

Social and Moral Criticism

Reviewing the classical Persian literature, all flaws and deficiencies could be overlooked but nobody can turn his back to the fact that most of the classical poets paid no heed to the social problems of the masses. Contrary to that, they used to sing for the ruling elite class. Importantly the major part of the contemporary literature reflects this ignored feature of the civil society.

Qaem Moqam Farahani and Fateh Ullah Shibani are the predecessors and pioneers in this regard. Initially it was Qaem Moqam who exposed the social dilemmas.⁽³⁴⁾ He not only criticized the social oppressions but also revealed the ruthlessness of the rulers, through his celebrated poem "Jalair Nama". It was a facetious poem closer to slang language and in fact inspired Iraj Mirza, whose illustrious poem "Arif Nama" is identical to Jalair Nama's informal language. He focused the fundamental issues and discussed the ground realities in detail.⁽³⁵⁾ No other poem could get more fame and applause than "Arif Nama" during the constitutional movement.

Fateh Ullah Shibani also criticized the political and social disorder. Again, Bahar truly stole the show with his gorgeous and elegant poetry. He became the voice of deprived and under privileged people. Eshqi used his poetry as a weapon to fight against the dishonest and mendacious rulers.⁽³⁶⁾ Farrokhi Yazdi also spoke about the wretched farmers, dejected laborers, gloomy political conditions, low-spirited civil society, possibilities of free and fair elections and basic human rights.⁽³⁷⁾

Issues of the Working Class

One of the most burning topics of this era was the issues of the working class. Such issues had never found any space in Persian literature. This gave a new look to the Persian poetry. Nasim Shomal was

the great admirer of labor class. Abul Qasim Lahuti, Eshqi and Arif also showed immense interest in pointing out the basic problems of the working class. Arif and Eshqi were extremist in the sense that they even tried to follow the teachings of Mazdak.(38)

The distinguished poem of Iraj Mirza, "Kargar wa Karfarma", is the most expressive and symbolic poem in this regard.(39) Likewise, Parvin E'tesami gave much attention to this issue. Many illustrative and evocative poems can be seen in her Divan.(40)

Women's Rights

The classical Persian is devoid of speaking about women's rights. Until the earlier part of the 20th century, it was not necessary to educate the girls. There was no concept of girls' schools. Very limited elite class and enlightened people could think to educate their daughters at home. For most of the girls, it was enough to learn how to read or recite the Holy Quran. Literacy of women was not an issue of the day. So, this issue gave a new look to the decayed Persian poetry.(41)

Mirza Yousuf Khan E'tesamul Molk, father of Parvin E'tesami, few years before the commencement of constitutional movement, in 1318 AH, translated the book "Tahrirul Mer'aa" by Qasim Amin Misri, into Persian under the title "Tarbiat-e-Niswan" and published from Tabriz. However, after the constitutional era, Ali Akbar Dehkhoda was the first person who spoke about the women rights.

The constitutional movement proved a milestone in bringing this issue to the lime light. After the First World War, there was a huge reflection of women rights in Iranian literature. Now, no writer or poet could close his eyes to this subject. Lahuti, Iraj, Eshqi, Parvin, Bahar and Shaharyar raised serious questions. Arif, besides being a political poet, played his role in awakening the Iranian women. Eshqi, better known for his political ideology, lifted the issue through his celebrated poem, "Kafan-e-Siyah".(42) Bahar's voice was even louder.(43) Parvin's poem "Zan dar Iran" was quite significant.(44)

The most outstanding and leading poet in this respect is Iraj Mirza. His memorable and haunting poem, "Maadar" shall keep him alive in the hearts of Iranians for ever.(45)

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