

The Need for a New and Comprehensive Persian Literary Theory

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Mr Vice-Chancellor, Excellencies, Professor Asif Naim, Professor Azarmi Dukht, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentleman:

While I feel great pleasure in having been invited to deliver the Inaugural Address at the conference on "Persian Literature in the 20th Century" at this great University, I must say that it is an honour that I do not really deserve. I am not a formal student of Persian literature, and my acquaintance with modern Persian literature is not more than that of an interested outsider. It is true that I have spent a lifetime in loving and enjoying classical Persian poetry, especially the poetry of the Indian Style poets and also the all time Iranian greats. I would not be exaggerating if I said that a great amount of Persian poetry lives with me like a living, breathing interior form.

Recently, Sheldon Pollock of Columbia University, a leading Sanskritist of our times, lamented that Sanskrit is no longer a vibrant reality today for scholars and students alike. He did not mean that Sanskrit ever was, or should be spoken and understood as a language of the common man. He meant that among students and scholars today, Sanskrit is more a grammatical, or lexical, or textual object to be dissected, taken apart and analyzed for scholastic purposes.

There are none, Sheldon Pollock complained, who read Sanskrit for pleasure.

Sheldon Pollock's fears may or may not be true. I am sure there will be people everywhere who won't agree with him. But I fear that Sheldon Pollock's dire scenario exists for Persian in India today, and maybe also in Pakistan. Much of the debacle is attributable to the colonial system of education, which we inherited. Much blame can also be laid at the door of the history of the subcontinent as it unfolded after independence and partition. There are social and economic causes too. Globalization, and its attendant explosion in trade and commerce and industry have given birth to a culture, which is not only consumerist but also places a premium on getting rich quickly and then getting richer even more quickly.

I was fortunate to be born in a time when it was quite proper to love poetry for its own sake. My parents' house was a house where the strict discipline of Muslim religious practices was the order of the day. Paradoxically, or should I say naturally, it was also a house where poetry was valued. Here, Omar Khayyam, with his apparently godless hedonism was cited as often as the totally submissive Sufi Sarmad, and the intellectually challenging moralist Sa'di. The Masnavi of Maulavi was of course a sacred Sufi text, but it was a poetic text too. Hafiz was a perennial source of joy, and Abdul Qadir Bedil, whom that austere Emperor Aurangzeb quoted in his letters, was looked upon with awe for his obscurity and his enchanting, powerful rhythms. Many years later I read a letter of the late nineteenth century Urdu poet Amir Mina'i in which he said that Bedil was a poet whose poetry could be enjoyed even when it was not comprehended.¹

The world where such things happened has ceased to exist in India. It still exists in Iran. But can it continue to exist indefinitely? And can Iran provide a lead in helping restore to the subcontinent some, if not all of the world, which the subcontinent has now lost?

2.

In order to begin my discourse, I can do no better than going back to Al-Jahiz, arguably the first organized literary theorist in Islam, and then going forward to a modern Moroccan interpreter of Al-Jahiz. Jahiz says:

¹ This was a truth that didn't escape Coleridge: "Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally understood." See R. P. Cowl, ed., *The Theory of Poetry in England*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1914, p. 305. Modern literary critics, whether of Urdu or Persian, haven't still understood this fully.

Judgements apply only to the appearance of things. God does not demand human beings judge of hidden natures or act on the basis of guesses about intentions (Al-Jahiz, *Epistles on Singing Girls*²).

You might well ask, what bearing does it have on poetry, or literary theory? A minute's thought will tell you that most assumptions about the nature of poetry in Persian literary theory over the last century and a half hinge upon the principle that a poet must reveal his inner thoughts, his *real self*, his true intention, in his poetry. A poetry not based on *experience* is not true; it needs to be rejected. Thus an Iranian poet expresses his simple, directly-feeling- and observing Iranian self in his poetry. And if Malik-ul Shu'ara Bahar is to be believed, an Indian poet expresses his Indian self in his poetry, a self that is inward looking, complex, loving of remote ideas and convoluted metaphors.

But this is precisely what Al-Jahiz is warning us against: he says that we should not judge the hidden natures of men, or act on the basis of guesses about intentions. Long after Al-Jahiz, as noted by Edward Said, Ibn-e Hazm declared that language expresses a verbal intention, and not a psychological intention. And there is a stage beyond that of the verbal intention as exemplified by Al-Jahiz; it is the stage occupied by the critic, or the reader of poetry. Abdelfattah Kilito comments thus on what I quoted from Al-Jahiz above:

It bears repeating that behind the poem's explicit addressee (the beloved), there is a second, implicit one: the lover of poetry, often the same person as the critic. It is this level of communication that concerns the theorist of poetry, because it is the forum where the poet displays his mastery of the medium.³

Abdelfattah Kilito is postulating here the existence of a critical reader and creator of poetry, a person who exists beyond the level of mere native competence and who is a student of the medium that the poet employs, not the raw ideas that he expresses.

Substantively, the tensions and confrontations between the Indian and Iranian practitioners and producers of Persian poetry have arisen because it was said that Indians cannot be masters of the everyday idiom of Persian language, and therefore cannot be competent producers of

² Quoted by Abdelfattah Kilito, *The Author and his Doubles, Essays on Classical Arabic Culture*, Trs. Michael Cooperson, Syracuse University Press, 2001, p.51.

³ Kilito, p. 119.

poetry in that language. Abdelfattah Kilito is telling us that there is another level of competence whose effects are attained by what he describes as "the lover of poetry, often the same person as the critic." The Indian theorist, linguist and lexicographer Siraj-al Din Ali Khan Arzu (1689-1756) who anticipated him here in his *Musmir*, says:

Since compounds have a special position and particular uses in the language, the common people have no knowledge of their subtleties and finer points. Some learned men of India told an Iranian poet that his [the Iranian's] teachers learnt the language from their old men and women, and they [the Indians], from the Iranian masters of standard and acceptable speech, like Khaqani and Anvari. Those learned Indians meant, by this, those very compounds, which occur at different places, and in great variety. Common people do not have any knowledge of their mysteries. Thus a person trained and educated by the elite of the language is superior to one trained and educated by its common users.⁴

Arzu made another interesting point when he said that poets have used a number of "old" words, which are not now heard in common speech. So, in regard to such words, "native speakers and non-native speakers are equal."⁵

The revolutionary ideas and lessons contained in Khan-e Arzu's writings should have been heeded and studied by Indians and Iranians alike. Rajiv Kinra says:

Ārzū postulated a deep linguistic relationship between Persian and Sanskrit... and in so doing scooped William Jones by several decades... Ārzū is regularly viewed as a defender of Indian Persian against the rebukes of Hazīn and a growing chorus of like-minded Iranian critics who began increasingly to claim that Indian literati did not have the competence or authority as native speakers (*ahl-i zabān*) to even speak Persian correctly, much less experiment poetically with the Persian language... Hazīn had claimed that Indian poets' poetic innovations were nothing but incompetent errors, in a sense challenging the very viability of transregional linguistic cosmopolitanism. A lesser intellect than Ārzū might simply have sought to

⁴ Raihanah Khatun, ed., *Musmir* (circa 1750), by Siraj-al Din Khan Arzu, Karachi, Institute of Central Asian and West Asian Studies, 1991, p. 33.

⁵ *Musmir*, p. 30.

rebut Hazīn’s criticisms; but Ārzū responds in *Musmir* with an entire theory of language, drawing on his mastery of eight hundred years of accumulated comparative philological knowledge to take Hazīn’s premise and turn it completely on its head. The argument, in all its breadth and complexity, is far too nuanced to even begin to summarize or do justice to here. But it basically hinges on two related propositions. First, that certain languages are linguistically related, in deep structural ways that are not always entirely obvious to everyday practitioners of one or the other language, or even multiple related languages. It is in this context that he makes the observation about Persian and Sanskrit noted above, and Ārzū suggests that it is this underlying linguistic “concomitance” (*tawāfuq*) which gives the Indian poets a kind of generative competence in Persian that is as old as that of the Iranians, and in effect pre-authorizes the Indian poets’ usages, even in the case of the radical verbal experimentation characteristic of the early modern vogue for “speaking the fresh” (*tāza-gū’ī*). A second key proposition is that of the inevitability of error by *all* speakers of a given language, even native ones. If it is demonstrable that even native speakers make mistakes, he reasons, then one cannot argue *prima facie* that native speakers have some special innate competence whereby to claim authority to dictate usage, particularly in a context where, as Ārzū had already tried to show, the very notion of who was or wasn’t a “native” speaker was inherently unstable. Literary discourse, moreover, was by its very nature something that even native speakers were required to learn not by mere speaking, but through education and the study of texts. This made them just as liable to err, whether in usage or in aesthetic taste, as anyone else.⁶

I beg to be forgiven for burdening my text with such a long quote, but it seems to me that Rajiv Kinra has summarized the position rather neatly. Arzu wrote at a time when Iranian writers were developing strong prejudices against translocalism. They felt that in a world, which

⁶ Rajiv Kinra: “Mirrors for Poets, Mirrors of Places: Indo-Persian Comparative Philology, ca. 1000 – 1800 CE”, paper for the forthcoming festschrift in honour of Sheldon Pollock.

seemed to be going away from them, they needed to assert total authority at least on their own language. In his encyclopedic *Riyaz-ul Shu'ara*, Valih Daghistani wrote about a Indian woman poet of the sixteenth century, Kamilah Begam, to the effect that she could not have been the author of a poem that was attributed to her. He said:

From that time [the time of Malik-al Shu'ara Faizi] to this, it has been more than a hundred years, and the spread of the Persian language in India has been growing with the passing of time, and is still growing. Yet I see that the menfolk of this country, not of speak of their women, do not know and understand Persian. What they in India have named "Persian", its words are Persian, taken separately, but when framed into compounds and spoken, it becomes a different language.⁷

3.

It was this rejection of translocalism, and especially of the Indian assertion and achievement in Persian literature, that led to the Iranian literary "movement" called *Bazgasht-i adabi* (The Literary Return). The first major voice against *sabk-i hindi* on literary as opposed to personal or linguistic grounds was that of Lutf Ali Beg Azar (d. 1780) who in his tazkira *Atashkada* (1779)⁸ came out specifically against Talib Amuli and Sa'ib. Azar had no real literary theory though, and his hostility to the Indian Style could perhaps be read as assertion of the Iranian linguistic identity at a time when Persian language had shrunk from its immense loci in Central Asia to within the Safavid boundaries of late eighteenth century. Riza Quli Khan Hidayat was no better (and was in fact almost abusive) in his *Majma'ul Fusaha* (1867/68)⁹. The hostility of Azar and Hidayat has also been attributed to the "Literary Return". Shams Langrudi, however disputes this and says that the decline of the Safavids caused poets to "turn their faces" from *sabk-i hindi* because the poetry of this style is that of "the intellect, power, and thought", while the devastation, loss, and sorrow wrought by the fall of the Safavids at the hands of the Afghans needed a

⁷ Sharif Husain Qasemi, ed. *Riyaz-ul Shu'ara* (circa 1762), by Ali Quli Khan Valih Daghistani, Rampur, Riza Library, 2001, p. 602.

⁸ Lutf Ali Beg Azar, *Atashkada*, 3 volumes, ed. Hasan Sadat Nasiri, Tehran, Amir-e Kabir, 1339-40 (=1960-61)

⁸ Riza Quli Khan Hidayat, *Majma'ul Fusaha*, 4 volumes, ed. Mazahir Musaffa, Tehran, Amir-e Kabir, 1339 (=1960).

⁹ Shams Langrudi, *Bazgasht-i Adabi*, Tehran, Nashr Markaz, 1375 (=1996), pp. 43-44.

“poetry of the heart” which gradually established itself in place of *sabk-i hindi*.¹⁰

To be sure, even Shams Langrudi is not much enamoured of *Bazgasht-i adabi*. He knows that it produced lacklustre poetry, with no capacity to inspire poets to greater efforts. The main reason was the lack of a literary theory, which could explain, and account for, in contemporary terms, the relevance of and the need for the poetry of the ancients. It took the *Bazgasht-i adabi* more than a few decades to produce just one substantial poet in Mirza Habib Qa'ani (1807-1853) who was a master of the *qasidah*, but his *qasidah* was not much more than a pastiche of the ancients, especially Minuchehri.

A literary theory doesn't involve just a listing of figures of speech and an account of the art of the rhyme. Literary theory starts with basic questions: What makes a poem meaningful? What is the nature of meaning? What kinds of meanings there are? What is the nature of metaphor? In what way is the concept of *mazmun*, or *ma'ni*, related to metaphor? Unless these and similar questions are raised and investigated, all efforts to understand classical Persian poetry are doomed to unsuccess. Moreover, all attempts to understand Persian poetry of the Indian Style will remain doomed to even greater unsuccess.

The failure to appreciate even the basic points about the theory of metaphor as developed by classical Persian poets and perfected by the poets of the Indian Style can be seen in the fact that no less a person than Ali Dashti couldn't see the metaphor on the which the following she'r of Kalim-e Kashani is based:

*You went into the garden for taking the air,
The rose became a floret again, because
It put its hands up to hide its face
in shame*¹¹.

Ali Dashti says:

The above verse cannot produce a meaning until eternity without end (*abadan*). For the rose, once it blooms, cannot be a floret again.

Hasan-e Husaini comments that Ali Dashti "doesn't know, or doesn't want to know, that the rules of poetry are different from those of botany. ... Surely this generation of literary people can never untie the knots for our younger generation of poets and would never lead this generation to

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¹¹ sair-e gulshan kardi o gul ghuncha shud bar-e digar// baskih az sharm-e khijalat dast pesh-e ru girift

new destinations."¹² But actually, the opposition here is not between science and poetry. It is between the logic of prose and the logic of poetry, especially the poetry of the Indian Style, where the poet conceives of a metaphor as literally true for the external world and he then employs the metaphor-as-fact to explain another fact about the external world. The theories of metaphor as given by academic critics do not work here.

Coleridge said: "I believe the souls of five hundred Sir Isaac Newtons would go to the making up of a Shakespeare or Milton."¹³ The problem that faced the literary critics in both literary cultures, Persian and Urdu, was the same: How to justify the existence of literature in the face of modern science and technology? Coleridge provided a clue, but the generations brought up in the scientific faith failed to grasp it. Asia, or in modern parlance, the Third World was unable to feel pride in its literary heritage.

During the Constitution Era in Iran, we see the conflict taking a more concrete shape in the final rejection of the Indian Style by Malik-ul Shu'ara Bahar in his *Sabk Shinasi*. While it was proper to see language as not something monolithic and fossilized, and to recognize, as Khan-e Arzu (and many Iranians before him, and as also Amir Khusrau,) had done, that language, specially Persian, had many registers and many local styles, it was improper to try to divide the literary tradition in different and disparate segments, each segment more or less bound to separate locales. For example, whereas it would be quite proper to speak of an Irish or Australian or American idiom of English, it would be disastrous to see English literature as divided into Irish, American, Australian etc., styles.

Bahar's was a major effort at theory formation, but it did not provide any theoretical understanding even of the different styles in which he proposed to divide Persian poetry. By the time of Bahar, the impact of the West on Iran had become noticeable. A new, westernized interpretation of Persian poetry had become available through E.G. Browne's *A Literary History of Persia*. Originally published in 1902, it provided a fairly knowledgeable but extremely biased view of Persian poetry. Browne's biases were western, and highly

¹² Hasan-e Husaini: *Bedil, Sipihri, va Sabk-i hindi*, Tehran, Surosh, 1368 (=1989), p. 86.

¹³ In a letter dated March 23, 1801, to Thomas Poole. See Kathleen Raine, ed. *Coleridge: Poetry and Prose*, Penguin Books, 1957, p. 126.

influenced by the English Romantics¹⁴, but his judgements still carried weight. The following passage from Browne can be taken as representative of the value Browne put on Persian poetry in general:

From what has been said, it will now be fully apparent how intensely conventional and artificial Persian poetry is. Not only the metres and ordering of the rhymes, but the sequence of subjects, the permissible comparisons, similes, and metaphors, the varieties of rhetorical embellishment, and the like, are all fixed by a convention dating from the eleventh or twelfth centuries; and this applies most strongly to the *qasida*.¹⁵

Similar judgements had been passed by the British against Urdu poetry as well, and Urdu has had its share of "reformists" and modernizers beginning from the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The effect of these colonialist activities was similar in Persian and Urdu: a general disaffection with the accepted, classical modes of poetry, and a desire to get away from it all.

In Iran, this dissatisfaction with the past and consequent desire for change is best exemplified by the career of Nima Yushij (1895-1959) who is rightly regarded as the greatest modern Iranian poet. Nima began as a fairly conventional poet with his masnavi *Qissa-e Rang-e Paridah*. In spite of being in the masnavi form, the poem showed little inspiration from any of the great Iranian masnavis. Some influence of Paul Verlaine can however be seen in *Qissa-e Rang-e Paridah*. His most famous early poem *Afsanah* that earned him the title *sha'ir-e afsanah* (The Poet of *Afsanah*) is still heavy with French influences, but also reveals the inability of modern Persian language to come to terms with new ideas, which have no base in the tradition.

Nima, however, broke even more free in his more mature years, and earned the hostility of many of the academic type of readers and critics. Mahdi Hamidi once chastised Nima in the following verse:

He has three things:

¹⁴ Coleridge had a low opinion of Persian poetry; he found that it had "not a ray of imagination" in it and it was "deficient in truth." See his *Specimens of Table Talk*, London, John Murray, 1851, p. 59. The great Indian poet and scholar Shibli Nu'mani (1857-1914), though himself unconsciously influenced by English ideas about the nature of poetry, had a low opinion of Browne. He might have added that much of what Browne said about Persian poetry could very well apply to French poetry too.

¹⁵ E. G. Browne: *A Literary History of Persia*, Vol. II, rpt. edn., New Delhi, Goodword Books, 2002, p.84.

*Frenzy, and novelty, and stupidity;
Three things he doesn't have:
Metre, words, and meaning.*¹⁶

It must be noted here that Mahdi Hamidi has simply echoed Qudamah ibn Ja'far in his *Naqd-ul She'r*¹⁷. More than a millennium of literary development hadn't apparently enabled Iranian theorists of poetry to devise a theoretical apparatus that could meet the challenge of the new.

Undeterred, Nima continued to strike our farther. Finally, he rid Persian poetry of much of its prosodic structure and filled it with new themes. A whole generation of poets, including Furugh-e Farrukhzad learnt from him. The achievements of Nima, and other poets of the "New Poetry" (*she'r-i nau*) like Faridun Tawalluli, Mahdi Ikhwan Salis, Ahmad Shamlu, Farrukhzad and others extended the scope and range of modern Persian poetry. But these poets consistently refused to learn, or derive inspiration from their classical heritage and thus they couldn't revive the past in such a way that its pastness may not be a hindrance to its presentness.

One example of assimilation can be seen in Sohrab Sipihrī, who has leaned heavily on Hindu and Buddhist thought. As Num Mim Rashed said, "Sipihrī's thought has been deeply influenced by Eastern (especially Hindu and Buddhist) thought...His poetry is not like that of any living Persian poet."¹⁸

No poet of the New Poetry, nor any theorist either, seems to have tried to create a theory that could accommodate the New Poetry into the canon of tradition. Contrary to the Iranian situation, Muhammad Iqbal Lahori (1877-1938) in Urdu and Persian could assimilate no less than five literary and cultural traditions and thought complexes: the European, the Indo-Sanskrit, the Indo-Muslim, the Perso-Arabic, and Urdu.¹⁹ Though Iqbal's own, conscious poetic theory was heavily indebted to Utilitarianism, his actual practice was deeply rooted in

¹⁶ Quoted by Munibur Rahman in his: *Jadid Farsi Sha'iri*, Aligarh, Idara-e Ulum-e Islamia, Aligarh Muslim University, 1959, p. 66.

¹⁷ "The most concise and precise definition of a sh'er is: A she'r is that metrical and rhymed utterance which can signify some meaning." Qudamah Ibn Ja'far, *Naqd-ul She'r*, Trs. into Urdu by Muhammad Ja'far Ahrari, Srinagar, Iqbal Institute of Culture and Philosophy, 2008, p. 47.

¹⁸ Nun Mim Rashed, ed., and trs.: *Jadid Farsi Sha'ri*, Lahore, Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Adab, 1987, p. 21.

¹⁹ For a detailed examination of this question, see Shamsur Rahman Faruqi: *How to Read Iqbal? Essays on Iqbal, Urdu Poetry, and Literary Theory*, Lahore, Iqbal Academy, Pakistan, 2007, pp.3- 48.

classical Persian, particularly the Indian Style, and Urdu. The "New Poetry" in Iran achieved much, but it couldn't provide a body of theory and practice that would help the new poetry to cohere with the tradition, as Iqbal's poetry did in Urdu.

4.

By the time Nima died, Persian poetry had begun to resound with the "New Wave" (*Mauj-i Nau*). Like the "New Poetry" poets, the poets of the "New Wave" revelled in experimentation, only more so. Ahmad Riza Ahmadi went in for experimentation in form and content to the exclusion of almost everything else. According to Mim Sirishk, one of his critics, poets of the New Wave "randomly pick words from squares of crossword puzzles and lash them together. They do not string them in coherent structures. They just play with words."²⁰ Nun Mim Rashed himself says that Sirishk ignored the sheer beauty which flows from the apparent incoherence, and the poem, though "bereft of any higher purpose, creates aesthetic pleasure in the reader."²¹

The poets of the New Wave became targets of criticism at the hands of the New Poetry poets, just as they themselves had been castigated by poets of the Constitution Era.

So far, the story of modern Persian poetry has been very similar to that of modern Urdu poetry, with the difference that modern Urdu poetry did not entirely cut itself off from the classical models. Notwithstanding the persistent efforts of comprador colonialist theorists and pedagogues, the Urdu modernists stuck to the belief that the new poetry could not exist in a cultural or theoretical vacuum. The Urdu modernists developed coherent theoretical models to justify and assimilate their poetry in the main body of Urdu poetry.

In Urdu too, there was a newer wave, or movement, after the modernists of the 1930's and the 1940's. Contrary to the *mauj-e nau* poets, who were disliked by the *she'r-e nau* poets, modern Urdu poets of the later era idealized the poetry of their modernist predecessors. They did not imitate them; rather, they treated them as the founders on whose edifice they were building. They found theoretical justifications for them, and absorbed them in their critical canon.

²⁰ Quoted by Nun Mim Rashed, p. 47.

²¹ Nun Mim Rashed, pp. 47-48.

This has not happened with modern Persian poetry because the Iranian modernists did not create a theoretical structure liberal and flexible and logical enough to accommodate their classical heritage and their modern attainments. Indian Style poetry had provided a much-needed infusion when the native Iranian imagination had begun to flag. Rejection of *sabk-i hindi* should have been followed by the creation of a new literary theory, which could encourage and even instigate new creativity. Ideally, the new literary theory should have been robust enough to bear the burden of the past, the classical past as well the *sabk-i hindi* past. While both *she'r-e nau* and *mauj-e nau* looked to the West for models and also for inspiration, they should also have looked to western literary history. No modernist movement in the West ever rejected the past entirely. Their literary theory could always be made to account for all the best of the past. Modern Persian literature needs a similar theoretical revolution today.

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