

A Look at Persian Literature in Afghanistan

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Afghanistan was confronted with economic and social change which also sparked a new approach to literature. In the first decade of the twentieth century, social and political life in Afghanistan went through a period of re-orientation. In 1903 the first modern school was opened, modelled after the new schools in Europe. This school was named Habibieh after the Emir who ruled the country at the time. Beside Afghans there were also Indian teachers working in this school. It soon became a centre for new ideas, and it was there that Afghanistan's constitutional movement was born.

In 1911, Mahmud Tarzi, who came back to Afghanistan after years of exile in Turkey and was influential in government circles, started a fortnightly publication named *Saraj'ul Akhbar*. *Saraj* was not the first such publication in the country, but in the field of journalism and literature it instigated a new period of change and modernisation. A periodical named *Shams'ul Nahar* had started publication in the year 1873, but it was unable to influence journalism in any way and left no traces whatsoever in literary circles. *Saraj* not only played an important role in journalism; it also gave new impulses to literature as a whole and opened the way for poetry and lyrics to search for new avenues of expression so that personal thoughts took on a more social colour.

Mahmud Tarzi, who had become familiar with French and European literature indirectly via the Turkish language, used his publication to introduce these to his readers. He started to copy the style and use them as a model.

If we try to list the various aspects of Tarzi's influence on the changes to traditional Afghan literature, we come up with the following:

- European novels were translated, introducing readers to the European style of writing fiction which was very different to the Persian style. Jules Verne's novels were translated into Persian (Dari) and published separately. The ground was laid for Afghan writers to get acquainted with western literature.
- There was also a change in the field of poetry. Brushing aside personalised themes and the subject of love and romance, Tarzi's efforts opened the way for technical and European literary styles, and social and nationalistic aspects were given more importance.

He did not change the old style of writing; what he did was to clothe new ideas and perceptions in the classical style, and put new modes of expression in the framework of old forms of writing. The poetry style he liked was the school of Moghtaziat, which was first used in France and then found its way into Turkish, Persian and Afghan poetry. The Moghtaziat school not only used the two features mentioned above, it also tried to use the language of the street to give colour to poems. But it had to ignore the criticism levelled at it from some quarters. Tarzi even encouraged poets to write in their own dialects and published their poems in his magazine.

At the same time other literary modes of expression were used which also reflected the European literature of the time. Tarzi also published newly written plays for *Saraj* readers.

In 1298 (1919 AD), the King of Afghanistan, Amir Habib'ullah, was killed. His son, Eyn'ul do'leh Aman'ullah, became the new king. He soon set free the constitutionalists and leaders of the modernisation movements, who were languishing in prisons. These modern thinkers became leaders and took on managing positions in many areas. A new period of cultural development began (1919 – 1929) and publications and journalism flourished. In this same period, the fight for independence prevailed and the first constitutional law was established in Afghanistan. Women were freed from the necessity to wear hejab and cover themselves from head to toe.

As the liberal government was making efforts to modernise Afghan society, traditional forces organised themselves to fight this modernisation, and every effort by the government to bring about change and establish new methods in the fields of economics or politics was confronted by resistance from the traditionalists. In the end the fight between the forces of modernisation and traditionalism ended with the bitter defeat of the liberal forces.

Once attempts to modernise Afghanistan had been defeated, a period of repression began in which cultural efforts were put under the black umbrella of selfish rulers who left society no room to breathe. The period after the rule of Aman'ullah was a period in which journalists and publications were placed under scrutiny and censorship, thus losing their right to free expression. Even modernism in literature and poetry was suppressed.

In the year 1309 (1930 AD), after months of cultural stagnation, a group of writers founded the Herat literary circle. A year later another group calling itself the Kabul Literary Circle was founded in the capital. Both groups published their own regular magazines dedicated to culture and Afghan literature. But both, especially the Kabul publication, had little success in becoming a venue for modern Afghan poetry and writing. In time, the Kabul publication turned into a stronghold for traditional writers and poets, and modernism in Afghan literature was pushed to the fringes of social and cultural life. Meanwhile two-thirds of the writers of the Kabul group, who tended to be more liberal and hoped for freedom, were condemned by the government to long prison sentences.

Three of the prominent classical poets in Afghanistan at the time were Ghary Abdullah, Abdul Hagh Beytat and Khalil Ullah Khalili. The first two received the honorary title of Malik ul Shoara (King of Poets), one after the other. Khalili, the third and youngest, felt himself drawn toward the Khorasan style of poetry instead of the usual Hindi style. He was also interested in modern poetry, and wrote on the side a few poems in a more modern style with new aspects of thought and meaning.

In 1318, after two poems by Nima Youshij with the names 'Gharab' and 'Ghaghnus' were published, Khalili also wrote a piece of poetry under the name 'Sorude Kuhestan' or 'The Song of the Mountain' in the same rhyming pattern as Nima,

and sent it to the Kabul Literary Circle. But the traditionalists in Kabul refused to publish the piece in their magazine because it was not written in the old traditional rhyme, and they criticised Khalili for modernising his style of writing poems. Still, very gradually and despite all the efforts of traditionalists new styles did find their way into literature and literary circles.

The first book of new poems was published in the year 1336 (1957), and in the year 1341 (1962), a collection of modern Afghan poetry was published in Kabul. The first group who wrote poems in the new style consisted of Mahmud Farani, Baregh Shafi'i, Solyman Layegh, Sohail, Ayeneh and a few others. Later, others such as Vasef Bakhtari, Asadullah Habib and the writer of these lines joined the group. Each had his own share in modernising Afghan poetry. Historians have named the decade from 1964 to 1973 the democratic, constitutional monarchy, or the decade of constitutional law. In reality this decade brought about the end of the monarchy in Afghanistan. In this period constitutional law was implemented, giving people the right to organise political parties. The law of free press was put into place and newspapers and publications with different political views and aims started to appear. In this decade there were repeated mass protests in the streets, strikes, and political action at the University of Kabul which led to its closure.

Those who had influence on political and social life also left their marks on the cultural life of society and brought their new ways of thought and expression into the literary and social circles.

Wall of a house in Kabul
Photo: Stefan Weidner



These new ways of thought and the changes in the socio-cultural life were followed by new styles of writing and literature.

In the fourth and fifth decade of the last century in the Islamic calendar used in the region (approximately the years 1950 to 1970 AD), we see clear changes in Afghan poetry. Modern Afghan poetry finds its place in the literary mainstream and reflects the joyful but also sad moments in the lives of contemporary authors. Looking back we see that it divides into two separate schools. One school of poetry concerns itself with the hopes and fears of the individual and at the same time has a slightly pessimistic view of the future. The other tends to be more thoughtful and reflective in its outlook and is inclined toward Marxism-Leninism. It sings the praises of a world which does not yet exist, a better world of their fantasies. In the first group we find poems in praise of the beauty of the countryside, declarations of joyful and happy sentiments. In the second group of poems we find social critique, praise of imaginary heroes and songs about the better world of the poet's fantasies. One group is in search of solutions to personal problems and needs. The other group concentrates on the social issues and is in search of solutions for the problems of the society.

In 1973, an assassin's bullets put an end to the relative freedom. The new one party rule took over, curfew was enforced and an anti-democratic regime came to power. The new rulers allowed no compromises and accepted no other views. Free speech was dead and the desire for freedom was quashed. But the tragedy was not over yet. The April 1978 coup was still in the making. The Red Army had not yet crossed the border into Afghanistan, and the enemy bombers had not yet emptied their deadly cargo onto rooftops and fields. The coup and the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet army also split the ranks of the Afghan poets and writers. One group consisted of those who were in the establishment and worked with the new rulers; the other group was outside the new ruling class. One group accepted the new rulers and the other did not. Those poets who supported the government, and whose work had little literary merit, put themselves in its power and were followed by some vacillating poets who adopted their example. So poetry surrendered itself to ideology and was made its servant and helper. However, at the same time the poetry of resistance and opposition, both inside and outside the country, gradually began to take shape.

The poets outside the country worked in a free atmosphere and escaped censorship. These poets were not under the rule of the new Afghan government and did not have to heed the rules and constrictions put in place by it. They did not have to

hide their criticism in allegories. They could openly express their views and criticise without having to use indirect forms and hints. In this way poems written outside the country during this period took on the colour of political slogans.

Those who lived in the country itself had to be much more careful in choosing their words and expressing their thoughts. They had to veil their criticism for fear of punishment and torture. In time their style became very indirect and allegorical and their poems and novels became masterly works of indirect expression - so much so that even some of those who were being criticised did not realise that they were the object of criticism.

In the years of occupation, and for the first time in Afghan literary history, a writers' union was formed. It was named the Union of the Writers of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. From its inception in the year 1359 until 1366 (1980-1987) this union was a source of propaganda for the government, military rule and the occupation army.

In 1366 (1987) this writers' union was given a new status and was renamed the Union of Afghan Writers. In time it was able to attract writers with other political and social allegiances, and paved the way for literary work in Afghanistan to be freed from politicisation. In its twelve years of existence this union succeeded in publishing almost 200 books of poetry and novels, and made huge progress in introducing modern Afghan poetry to the public at large.

In the year 1371 (1992) the Islamic fundamentalists attacked Kabul and other Afghan cities and closed all centres of literature and culture including the Union of Afghan Writers.

Suppression of culture, prejudice and reactionary rule left no room for modern literature and liberal views. Lawlessness and the rule of the Taliban burned all bridges to modernism and darkened the horizon of hope for the future. A time of chaos ensued to the extent that over five million people had to leave their homes and go into exile both within and outside the country, including thousands of writers, poets, novelists, translators, actors and artists. My countrymen are spread all over the world. It is estimated that they have found sanctuary in sixty countries.

Prose

In the early years of the publication of Saraj (1911 - 1918), the ground was laid for Afghan writers to become familiar with western prose. But new impulses in literary circles, cultural developments during the reign of Habib'ullah and even Tarzi's efforts could not entirely pave the way for Afghan writers to develop a modern style of prose.

Under the rule of Aman'ullah, an atmosphere of political and social change developed. The po-

ple enjoyed political self-determination and constitutionalists were managing the affairs of the country. Free publications appeared in Kabul and spread to other cities. The press was free and writers enjoyed free expression. Novelists who earlier had to resort to allegories and hints could now use a direct and simple style of narration.

During this period the first novel was printed by the government-owned *M'arefate Ma'aref*, a publication devoted to educational themes. This novel, which was printed in instalments in the year 1298, is called *The Great War* (The Holy War). It is a tale of people's resistance against colonial Great Britain. The hero of the tale is a man named Mohammad Akram and his courage-

ous struggle is the main theme of the story. The author of *The Great War* is Moulawi Mohammad Hossain Panjabi, who earlier had to endure long imprisonment because of his political beliefs. Although this novel uses a more modern writing style, at the same time it also contains elements of traditional Persian writing.

The first truly modern Afghan novel is *Taswire Ebrat*, which was written by Mohammad Abdulghadere Afandi, the son of Sardar Mohammad Ayub Khan, an Afghan prince. The Sardar had lost his claim to the throne to his cousin and had to flee to Iran. Later he moved to India with his family, including his eight-year-old son Mohammad Abdul Ghader. Abdul Ghader stayed and went to school in India, and it was there in the year 1922 that he wrote his book, *Taswire Ebrat*.

Taswire Ebrat is a novel of its time and is written in the modern style of prose. In this novel the author takes a critical look at contemporary society, particularly the upper class still clinging to traditional ways of the rich. The main character is a woman named Bibi Khoury Jan, a typical woman of her class.

Although *Taswire Ebrat* is the first short Afghan novel written in the new style, the author is able to develop the story very well and the characters are full of life and typical of the time. The language used by the characters in the novel, especially that of Bibi Khouri Jan, is a sample of the language used in the society of the time. The novel also contains elements of traditional prose, but because of the clear storyline and the use of contemporary language, it becomes an enjoyable modern novel.

Ten years of relative freedom passed and, as we have said, were replaced by the new era of cultural repression and censorship. The union of writers in Kabul still appeared to be active but it also, like the other few remaining groups, lost its influence on the literary and cultural circles. *Adab* magazine, a Kabul University publication, concentrated on research into traditional writing and had no bearing on modern prose and poems.

It is surprising that other newspapers and magazines printed in

Sidigullah Fadai

The Future of Islam in Afghanistan

The question of Islam's future in Afghanistan must be viewed against the background of recent developments and of the country's history.

On the political level secular forces and conservative religious groups are currently confronting one another. That becomes apparent when you look at Afghanistan's provisional draft constitution. A compromise might be formulated thus: Afghanistan is an Islamic state but it is open to question whether and to what extent legislation should be founded on Shari'a. Since Islam is so strongly established among the population only one social order is conceivable, according to Islam a fundamental role and respecting religious sensitivities.

The mistakes made under King Amanullah and between 1978 and 1992 must be avoided. The conditions that prevailed under Taliban rule must not be allowed to return either. Neither a radical secular approach nor fundamentalist Islam is acceptable in the long term. Any extreme position would bring into play the militant forces of the opposition.

The integrative strength of Islam is particularly indispensable in regions where ethnic conflicts repeatedly break out.

Furthermore, the people did not allow their practice of religion to be spoiled by religious demagogues, so trust in Islam is still very strong despite the excesses of the Taliban.

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Afghanistan took up the cause of modern Afghan prose and poems. The dailies *Eslah* and *Anis* started out by printing short novels as a supplement. Later they published books of writers of modern Afghan prose and novels. Still more surprising is that the first book of modern short stories was published by *Aryana* magazine, the official publication of the Afghan Historical Society. In a time when Afghan culture was facing resistance to every form of change and modernisation, this publication printed works of two modern Afghan writers, Pajwak and Toruwayan.

The ten years between 1343 and 1352 (1964 to 1973) were not only an important period for the development of modern Afghan poetry; they were also of great importance for the development of modern Afghan prose. During this period new styles of prose writing developed, and the influence of Western literature is quite palpable. Asadullah Habib, Dr. Akram Osman, A'zame Rahnaward Zaryab, Sepujami Rouwuf (later Sepujami Zaryab) busied themselves with writing short stories. In the year 1344 (1965), Asadullah Habib wrote his first modern novel, *Sepid Andam*, and Rosta Bakhtari published his modern novel in Tehran.

In these years one could easily discern the influence of Soviet literature on the Afghan scene. Afghan students studying in the Soviet Socialist Republic, the friendly relations between the two nations and the visits of delegations to both countries all played a role, as well as a flood of modern Soviet literature which became easily available in Afghanistan. These were books written by authors such as Maxim Gorky, Michail Sholokhov, Chingiz Aitmatov and others. These were worthy examples of modern prose for Afghan writers to emulate. At the same time, as well as the Realists, writers like Franz Kafka, Albert Camus and Sadeghe Hedayat (an Iranian writer), who employed a more subtle and psychological style of writing, also exerted their own influence on Afghan prose.

Some other writers sympathised with the philosophical pessimism prevalent at the time and reflected these thoughts in their prose. So we can distinguish between three different schools of literature in the decade before the April coup d'état:

- Realism, reflecting on the social situation and in search of lost ideals
- Those who took a more psychological view in their writings and were more interested in the individual
- Romantic novels and stories. These can again be subdivided into two groups: firstly, those novels dealing with a romantic form of love, and secondly those with a more erotic undertone.

After the coup d'état in April 1357 (1978), writers such as the poets also split into two groups. One group worked in the service of the party and government. Again, the writings of this group can be divided into three types:

- In praise of the coup, introducing it as a people's revolution and trying to justify its achievements
- Encouraging friendship between the people of Afghanistan and the Soviet Republic
- Critical of the opposition and the Islamic fundamentalists, introducing them as the enemy of the people and also attacking American imperialism.

Almost all of those writers who belonged to these groups were themselves members of the Democratic People's Party of Afghanistan, which ruled the country under the one-party system. These writers supported and praised the April coup in their short stories and novels.

It must be noted that too at the present time Afghan literature is under the influence of outside ideas and trends. This influence sometimes works in a direct and easily discernable way, while at other times it is indirect and veiled.

The other group of novels belonged to resistance literature. Here the reader encounters criticism of the regime and the central government, or praise for the opposition movement. There are three sources of influence on our culture and our literature. These are:

1) The Russian prose and literature written both in the Tsarist period and in the time of the Soviet Republic, in other words the ideas and writings of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Chekhov, Pushkin, Mayakovsky, Lermontov, Gorky, Sholokhov, Chingiz Aitmatov and others.

Nineteenth century Russian literature left its impression on Afghan literature. After French literature, it was Russian literature that affected Afghan literature the most. The reason was the proximity of the two countries on the one hand, and on the other hand the ready availability of classical Russian books and novels in Afghanistan.

The Russian literature written after the October revolution primarily influenced the Afghan left and members of the Marxist party. For them it was a form of prose to be emulated. The main themes were social realism in Russia, the differences in the social structure of society, protection of the lower levels of society, fantasies of a better socialist life and fictitious heroes of the system. Poets like Mayakovsky, Yase Nien and even revolutiona-

ry poets like Lahuti (an Iranian poet living in exile in Russia) exerted a special influence on the Persian (Dari) poets in Afghanistan.

2) The influence of Iranian literature on modern Afghan prose and poetry, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, must also be taken into consideration.

The Tudeh party, the Iranian Marxist party that went through many ups and downs and changes in this period, left a very clear impression on Afghan socialist literature. Socialist literature in Afghanistan was very receptive to influence from the socialist countries and parties. The writers belonging to this group have always emulated and praised such ideology in other countries. Beside the influence exerted by the Russian writers, we also find that these groups admired writers like Brecht, García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, Farukh Yasdi and the Iranian poet Ahmad Shamlu.

3) Western literature, especially French and German, was also much admired and influenced Afghan literature from the second decade of the twentieth century onward.

In recent times American literature has also gained influence. Short stories, plays, essays, novels, prose and poems from the West have all had their effect on our literature. Translation of European literature in Afghanistan, and also a flood of Western books printed in Iran, have helped to make this literature better known and paved the way for the Afghan authors. So traditional literature was confronted with a modern form that, especially in case of poetry, was innovative and colourful. Traditionalists insisted on their old forms and were unwilling to accept new styles, while on the other hand the followers of the new school of literature experimented with the new styles. Some of them boldly and eagerly, others gradually and timidly, they offered their essays, poems and stories to the public. The fact that many Afghan students were studying in countries like Russia and the western European countries also played an important part in introducing the public to European writers and intellectuals.

We have noted that in the early twentieth century the first translations of some European prose and novels appeared. Tarzi had for instance translated some works of French writers like Jules Verne into Persian (Dari). There were of course also some translations available earlier in the second half of the nineteenth century, but these were mostly books on political, historical and social subjects. Notable amongst these earlier translators was Abdulghader, who in 1873 translated an article from *The Times of London* and had it printed.

Translation from other languages has been very infrequent and slow, and mostly unsatisfactory, but since 1950 we can discern a marked improvement in this area. Most of the translations are from the French, followed by the works of German and English writers.

These translations include the works and novels of German authors like Goethe, Schiller, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse and Bertolt Brecht, as well as translations of English language writers like Rabindranath Tagore, William Grey, William Manchester, Somerset Maugham, Agatha Christie and others. Afghan translators living in other countries have also been active and have translated some books and novels from other languages to our mother tongue, but because the facilities for printing them are not readily available, these translations have not found much public recognition.

In the past twenty-three years, many of our writers and intellectuals have had to leave their country and go into exile. This has dealt a heavy blow to Afghan literature. The occupation of our country through one hundred and thirty thousand soldiers of the Red Army started this wave of exile from Afghanistan. Afterwards the Mujaheddin (Islamic fundamentalists) took power, and the wave became even stronger. With the appearance of the Taliban it turned into a flood. So hardly any Dari writer was left in Afghanistan to continue the work. Persian (Dari) literature, which up to this period had enjoyed some coherence, was divided into factions. Each group found itself against a different cultural backdrop and took a new turn.

After this period, we can make out three distinct factions and styles of writing:

- 1) Afghan literary work in Iran
- 2) Afghan literary work in Pakistan
- 3) Afghan literary work in the European countries.

Each of these groups has developed its own style under the influence of the local style and literature. In Iran, given the common language, and the availability of and free access to a very rich literary heritage in the Persian language, the Afghan writers could more or less continue the style they had started in their homeland. At the same time their counterparts in Iran were a source of literary help and encouragement. When we compare the modern Afghan poems written during this time of exile in Iran with those written in other countries, we can discern a more pleasant and mature style of rhyming, and a group of young Afghan poets that has developed a contemporary poetic style. It has to be noted that under the influence of the Islamic government in Iran their poems some-

times have a religious touch, while at the same time retaining their originality, fine balance and pleasant rhythm.

In Pakistan, the Afghan exiles had very intense contact with the developments in their country. Their works, poems and essays reflect these negative experiences, such as war, and social and cultural crisis. Another difference to Iran was that in Pakistan there was no censorship, and the costs of publishing books was lower, so the writers could more easily print and offer their books to the public. In the last twenty years hundreds of Afghan books have been printed in Pakistan and distributed all over the world.

In Europe, America and Canada, because of language barriers and the relatively small number of readers of Persian language literature and poems, we do not find a very active literary circle. The young generation of Afghan poets and novelists in particular has not found the means to develop in these countries.

Many Afghan poets and novelists who lived in Pakistan have now returned to their country. But the majority of Afghans living in other countries have not yet returned and are waiting to see which direction the events in Afghanistan will take in the future. Today, Afghan poetry, and prose too for that matter, can be described as political. Its themes are war, occupation, exile, sadness, the problems of living in a foreign land,

and nostalgic tales of the past. There still are rival factions of traditionalists and modernists,

but the new names we encounter in the last thirty years of Afghan literary history are the names of those who have found their literary homes on the field of modern Afghan poetry. Some are even followers of so-called 'free verse', a form that does not even accept rhyme in poetry. Although this style has not yet found a place of its own in the arts, it could well develop into a new form in the future.¹

Novels and short stories have in the recent past also mainly had themes based on the events and changes of the past few decades. The newcomers to this scene focus their work on illustrating and relating the recent changes, but they use a modern prose to achieve this in their stories and novels.²

Modern Afghan literature has lost its coherence and is moving in different directions simultaneously. Only when it finds an all-embracing style of its own can we be optimistic about its future development.³

Translated from the Persian (Dari) by Sohrab Elahi

- 1 The following are some of the notable new Afghan poets of the last 25 years: Latif Pedram, Partou Naderi, Samie Hamed, Kazem Kazemi, Abutaleb Mozafari, and notable women poets: Leyla Serahat, Khaledeh Forough, Homayra Neghat and Soraya Wahedi.*
- 2 The following is a list of Afghan novelists of the last quarter century: Khaled Nawisa, Razegh Ma'mum, Husain Fakhri, Sorour Azarbaksh, Aref Soltaunzadeh and others.*
- 3 Our writers had to go into exile and found new homes in different countries. On August 30th 2003, a founding assembly met in Leiden in the Netherlands and the Union of Afghan Poets and Writers was established.*

*Discarded chairs at the
University of Kabul
Photo: Stefan Weidner*

