

The Bleeding Pen

Literature and Politics in Modern Iran

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Introduction

In the blurb for his planned 20-volume *The History of Persian Literature*, the late Ehsan Yarshater (1920–2018), a Nestor of Iranian Studies, characterised Persian poetry as the jewel in the crown of Persian culture.¹ This is not an exaggeration; poetry plays a role in every domain of Persian culture. If Persian culture is the body of Persian-speaking peoples, poetry is the soul, the stamina, and the aura. This soul was breathed into the body during the renaissance of Persian culture in the ninth century when, after two centuries under the sway of Arabic, literate Persians asserted themselves by composing poetry in their mother tongue, and this poetry played an essential role in the revival of Persian culture.² One example is Ferdowsi's monumental poem, *Epic of the King* (*Shāh-nāme*). Encompassing over 50,000 couplets, the epic recounts the history of the Iranian peoples, from the creation myth to the arrival of the Muslim Arabs in Persia. One of its central themes is the ethics of good rule and true justice. The epic is still read, recited, performed and embroidered upon in Iran today.

In the early Islamic context, in which most of the ancient cultures of the region, including Egypt, had acquiesced in the dominance of Arabic language and culture, the rise of Persian as a literary and cultural medium was surely politically marked. The emergence of several local dynasties in Eastern Iranian lands which propagated Persian culture by inviting poets to the court greatly enhanced Persian culture. A history of the role of Persian poetry as a political medium remains a desideratum.³ One could argue that in this classical and largely courtly tradition, literature is a twin of politics, since literature carries political messages, and politics provides new subjects for literature. Persian poetry was not only used at Persian courts (and later at Ottoman and Mughal courts and even at a court in China), it became a medium for mystics in a vast area from the Balkans to Bengal.⁴

In a country with a tumultuous political culture in which poetry functions as an icon of identity, it is not surprising that poetry, and literature in general, is still a chief medium for commenting on sociopolitical events. Basing himself on Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962), Roland Bleiker says that the poetic connects “the soul and the mind, thus giving us back our dreams and opening up possibilities for creating ‘images which have not been experienced, and which life does not prepare.’”⁵ Bleiker argues that poetry is the core of language and language is the essence of human beings, thus poetic aesthetics throw light on identities, such as the Korean national identity, on relations, including international relations, and on contemporary political events such as war, genocide, terrorism and climate change. His characterisation applies seamlessly to the Iranian case: “Poetry is, in fact, all about language, about engaging its core and stretching its boundaries so that it becomes possible to think and dream again. It is in this sense that poetry is a perfect illustration of an aesthetic engagement with politics: a kind of micro-biotope in which we can observe, in an experimental way, why and how the aesthetic matters to politics.”⁶

Persian poetry became even more central to politics during the ‘awakening’ leading to the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911).⁷ Poets ceased to praise kings and courtiers, and directed their attention to ordinary people and to communicating modern European political philosophies and the sociopolitical events of the period. Their poems, published in the newly-founded newspapers and recited in coffee houses and bazaars, were instrumental in Iranians re-evaluating their own culture in the light of technological and social innovations in Europe. The famous poets of this movement became models for contemporary Iranian intellectuals. Indeed, poets and writers are so essential in the turbulent history of twentieth-century Iran that any history of modern Iran neglecting the role of literature – poetry, short stories and novels, and more rarely drama – would be seriously incomplete.

There are many examples of literary engagement with the sociopolitical events after the Constitutional Revolution period. Bozorg ‘Alawi (1907–1997) with works such as prison stories, *Waraq pāra-hā-ye zendān* (‘The Torn Pages of the Prison,’ 1941) and *Panjāh o se nafar* (‘The fifty-three,’ 1942), which reflect prison life during the Pahlavi period, comes to mind. ‘Alawi’s works were banned in Iran between 1953 and 1979.⁸

Basing himself on Arthur Rimbaud, Bleiker refers to the subjectivity of language and how our thinking is controlled by language, going so far as to change Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am,” to “I am thought.”⁹ This comes close to the link that Persian poets from Ferdowsi’s time, in the tenth

century, have drawn between poetry and reason (*kherad*). For them, poetry is essentially thought inspired by the Unseen. The Persian word *sokhan*, speech, also means intellect, and the logos.¹⁰ Modern Persian poets are deeply cognizant of the classical literary tradition when they comment on a sociopolitical event. Poetry being thought implies that poetry could also control people's thinking. Bleiker states, "The essence of poetry, then, is not located primarily in its formal aspects, such as rhyme or line breaks. The key, rather, lies in the self-consciousness with which a poem engages the links between language and socio-political reality."¹¹

The Present Collection of Articles

This collection of articles is a must for any scholar of Persian literature who wants to study Persian literature from the 1960s to the first decades of the 1979-Revolution. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, an authority in Persian Studies, has participated in the literature of the period and in the literary lives of the major Iranian poets and writers. In individual chapters, he shares his experiences with authors such as Ahmad Shāmlu, Akhavān, and Gholāmhosein Sā'edi, writing about their lives, governed by the state's repression, censorship, and extortion. While Karimi-Hakkak brings this unique personal perspective into his analysis, he falls between an engaged participant and a critical scholar. He examines the activities of the authors, their establishment of the Iranian Writers' Association, and surveys the relevant sociopolitical events.¹² The chapters deal with a turbulent period of modern Iran, in which Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989) entered the political scene, was arrested, exiled and later returned to Iran as a leader. Iran witnessed a radical change from monarchy to theocracy, the longest conventional war of the twentieth century in which one and half million people were killed (i.e., the Iran-Iraq war 1980–1988), and the new era of international politics between Iran and its new allies.

Another unique quality of this collection is that Karimi-Hakkak is the first scholar to examine certain topical subjects. It is an honour and privilege to include this collection of articles in the Iranian Studies Series at Leiden University. It is not my intention to review individual articles in this short introduction. Rather I would like to direct the reader's attention to the significance of Karimi-Hakkak's scholarship on modern Persian literature and its close relationship to politics. Karimi-Hakkak persuasively shows that literature and politics are so much interrelated that politics deeply affected the

lives of a generation of poets and writers, some having their works banned, some being imprisoned or exiled, and some executed.

Karimi-Hakkak's subject touches the core of modern Persian history. Being part of that intellectual and literary generation himself, Karimi-Hakkak describes the literary activities, how poets and writers found ways to convey their ideas, and the writers' struggle with the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979). A key element is his meticulous analysis of the history of the Writers' Association of Iran (*Kānun-e Nevisandegān-e Irān*), founded in 1968. This essay perceptively discusses how the Iranian intellectuals, writers and poets had to live in a repressive society, constantly fearing arrest, imprisonment, and even execution. Karimi-Hakkak gives examples from first-hand witnesses. For instance, he cites Behāzin (1915–2006),¹³ a prominent novelist, translator, and active Marxist, who says in one of his stories that, when he asked how (mere) writers could entice people to take up weapons to fight the Pahlavi regime, the military prosecutor told him “the concept of enticement to take up arms is not limited only to actual weapons. Rather, any spoken or written statement can provide a context for opposition because it arms them against the state.”¹⁴ This short citation shows how repressively censorship operated during the Pahlavi period. One of the main aims of the Writers' Association was to fight censorship, but the Pahlavi regime did not leave room for any fight. Censorship had a deep impact on intellectual life in Iran. Karimi-Hakkak shows how, according to official statistics, the number of annually published books “dropped from over 4,000 in 1969 to about 700 in 1976,” because of strong censorship, while the “number of pirated editions and unauthorized publications in the same period grew tenfold.”¹⁵ The books of prominent writers were banned, and even ordinary words such as “winter,” “night,” “tulip” and “forest,” associated with the guerrilla movement in the Caspian Sea area, became problematic. The term *gol-e sorkh* or “red rose” was suspect, as it could refer to the executed guerilla Khosrow Golesorkhi (1944–1974).

Karimi-Hakkak characterises the activities and place of the Association eloquently, “Its fortunes, consisting of periods of feverish activity and lifeless dormancy, epitomize the pattern of intellectual life in Iran, reflecting its problems and promises, its intellectual validity and artistic vitality, its ideals, achievements, and failures.”¹⁶ The Association was active in a period in which autocracy had reached a zenith. In the 1960s several consequential events happened. In 1960 John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) was elected President of the United States, and he criticised the Shah's regime. Following the death of the quietist Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi Tabātabā'i (1875–1961), who

had been the source of emulation for much of the Shiite world, Ayatollah Khomeini, then a cleric of average rank, came onto the scene. This coincided with the Shah's six programmes of reforms, including land reform and women's suffrage, initiated in 1963. The reforms were later named the White Revolution of the Shah and the People. Ayatollah Khomeini voiced his disagreement with the reforms, which generated demonstrations during which many people were killed. Khomeini himself was arrested, leading to more bloody demonstrations. In addition to his criticism of the reforms, especially women's suffrage, Khomeini strongly condemned the Shah for passing a law giving diplomatic immunity to Americans living in Iran. Khomeini was imprisoned and later exiled to Turkey, and then to Iraq. In 1965, the Prime Minister Hasan-ʿAli Mansur (1923–1965) was assassinated by a member of the fundamentalist group, *Jamʿiyat-hā-ye moʿtalefeh-ye Eslāmi*, which supported Khomeini's ideology. The Shah created an army around himself, and eradicated all political parties, establishing a one-party system.

The situation of poets and writers in the 1950s and 1960s under the repressive state remained frozen. Literary works of this period reflect the quiescence of intellectual life. Karimi-Hakkak's biographical essays could be characterised as remarkable eye-witness accounts of the lives, works, and regular daily activities of prominent figures of Persian intellectual and literary history, interlaced with unique personal memories. For instance, in his essay on Mehdi Akhavān Sāless (1928–1990), a poetic giant of twentieth-century Iran, he describes meticulously how he first met the poet:

'He sure has a peculiar way of looking at you,' I said to the friend who had taken me to meet the Iranian poet Mehdi Akhavan Saless in the summer of 1979. My friend, fellow poet Mahmud Azad Tehrani, nodded, and I tried to explain: 'It was as if he were eyeing me on two levels, a constant surface look that seemed simple and trusting, and a sharp occasional glance, skeptical and testing, that penetrated at times all the way down into my soul, fixing it as if at the point of a needle.'¹⁷

Observations such as the above are interwoven with erudite and sharp analyses of the literary works. Akhavān is one of the sophisticated poets of his generation, giving the 'new poetry' movement (*she'r-e now*) a "solid background in the classical tradition, an uncanny sense of dramatic storytelling, and a facility with words that distinguishes his style from all the other members of his generation." We do not have many scholarly works on Akhavān in English and this essay is a unique examination of the life and works of a poet

who is central in modern Persian literature, as well as giving us unique personal anecdotes. Karimi-Hakkak demonstrates how Akhavān could bridge the two literary camps in the period when he thrived as a young poet. There was at that time a literary battle between modernists, staunch supporters of New Poetry led by Nimā Yushij (1897–1960), and the traditionalists, who criticised New Poetry and remained faithful to the millennium-old tradition of Persian poetry.¹⁸ In addition, the fall of the democratically-chosen Mohammad Mosaddeq (1882–1967) through the intervention of the CIA and the installation of a repressive regime created disenchantment in Iran, especially among intellectuals whose hope for freedom of expression was shattered. It took about thirty years for intellectual life to recover, in the open dissatisfaction in the 1970s which led to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Karimi-Hakkak depicts how Akhavān's iconic opening lines, known by heart by many Iranians, describe the frigidity, alienation, and impotence of the period, warning Iranians of an “intolerably repressive state”:¹⁹

*Salam-at ra nemikhahand pasokh goft,
sarha dar gariban ast.
Kasi sar barnayarad kard pasokh goftan o didar-e yaran ra
Negah joz pish-e pa ra did natvanad,
keh rah tarik o laghzan ast.
Va-gar dast-e mahabbat su-ye kas yazi
beh ekrah avarad dast az baghal birun,
keh sarma sakht suzan ast.
Nafas k-az garmgah-e sineh miayayad borun abri shaved Tarik
cho divar istad dar pish-e chashmanat.
Nafa k-in ast pas digar cheh dari chashm
ze chashm-e dustan-e dur ya nazdik.*²⁰

None will answer your hello, heads are bent in collars
none dares raise a head to respond, to meet your friendly face
your eyes cannot see but a single step ahead
for the path is dark and slippery
and if you extend a hand of love to someone
reluctantly will he move his hand out of his bosom
for the cold is scorching in the extreme
your breath, rising out of the warm hearth of your own chest
turns into a dark cloud
stands like a wall before your eyes,

this being your own breath, what do you expect
from the glances of near or remote friends?²¹

While many poets and writers remained engaged in sociopolitical developments, others wanted to disentangle themselves from politics, writing poetry or short stories for the sake of art itself, cherishing artistic and aesthetic values rather than conveying a political message. Persian poets of this kind have had a hard time escaping from the stereotype of the engaged literati, especially in the decades following the 1979-Revolution when people expected poets and writers to voice their opinions on political events. Addressing this subject in his treatment of Ahmad Shāmlu (1925–2000), one of the greatest poets of twentieth-century Iran, Karimi-Hakkak demonstrates how the poet began his career entirely engaged with sociopolitical developments. As the years went by, his poetic genius turned from an authentic social response to politics to filling the poetic space with imagination by evoking new images. As Karimi-Hakkak shows, this transformation is visible in Shāmlu's collections of poetry, from *The Fairies* and *Poetry that is Life* to collections such as *Aida in the Mirror*, *Blossoming in the Fog*, *Phoenix under the Rain*, *Elegies of the Earth* and *Abraham in the Fire*.

The present collection of essays highlights the political processes affecting Persian literature, emphasising how Persian writers and poets suffered imprisonment, threats and even execution both during the Pahlavi dynasty and after the 1979-Revolution. Karimi-Hakkak observes that even before returning from exile, Ayatollah Khomeini referred to writers as “‘agents of the shah’ and lackeys of the superpowers, and warned the faithful to steer free from their influence.”²² In such a vehement political context, the poets became rebels against totalitarianism. Shamlu, for instance, wrote a famous poem after the Revolution, which displeased the government, which then forced the poet to focus on scholarly research instead of writing poetry. The poem “In this Blind Alley” perceptively depicts life in post-revolutionary Iran, conveying how censorship, state control, and intimidation created a frigid and loveless life in Iran. The poem became instantly famous, even proverbial, on the lips of people who wanted to describe the repressive situation of Iran (see the chapter *Of Hail And Hounds*).

From the beginning, the Islamic Republic was unequivocal in its treatment of non-revolutionary intellectuals, as can be seen from the high statistics for books banned, prosecutions and imprisonments. In the West, Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, authorising his murder, is well-known. In Iran, many writers lived under severe censorship and sociopolitical

restrictions. Karimi-Hakkak foregrounds such cases. A salient example is the arrest of ‘Ali-Akbar Sa‘idi-Sirjāni (1931–1994), an essayist, poet and writer who criticised the Islamic Republic of Iran. Sirjāni’s talent lay in his satirical style, drawing on classical Persian poetry and applying it to modern times. For instance, he alluded to Hāfez’s (1315–1390) treatment of the clerical class as dissemblers with double standards. A main reason for Sirjāni’s arrest was that he had a huge impact on society. To silence him, the Ministry of Information charged him with trafficking in narcotics, sodomy, and contact with counterrevolutionary elements, all offences that can be punished with execution. His books were banned, as they were considered to be camouflaged criticisms and even an open assault on Islam. Through the example of Sirjāni, Karimi-Hakkak exhibits how totalitarian states resort to violence, imprisonment and execution to silence writers. In such states, sensitivity to authors’ influence can become so intense that their settings, characters, ideas in anything they write are assumed to be directed at undermining the state’s policy and legitimacy. In Sirjāni’s case, the Islamic Republic inferred that his literary production was poking fun at Islam and the Islamic government. Sirjāni criticised clerics for their lack of historical awareness and even lack of knowledge of Persian, implying that some of the clerics were not even able to read a simple Persian text. An example that Karimi-Hakkak offers from Sirjāni’s work relates to the book *Kurosh-e dorughin va jenāyat-kār* (‘Cyrus, the Impostor, the Criminal’) by Sādeq Khalkhālī (1926–2003), a low-ranking cleric who rose to a high position and became infamous for his executions at the beginning of the Revolution. To delegitimise the monarchy and support the new vision of an Islamic Iran, Khalkhālī critiques King Cyrus (600–530 BC), who in the Pahlavi period had been a pre-Islamic role model in the monarchy’s nationalist ideology. In this book, Khalkhālī misreads the phrase *rāh-zani* (‘highway banditry’) as *rāh-e zani* (‘the path of femininity’), and on that basis said that Cyrus was a homosexual. Sirjāni derides this misreading in an attractive teasing style.

Another topic Karimi-Hakkak discusses in these essays is the effects of the 1979–Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), which forced millions of Iranians to leave their homeland for Europe, Canada and the United States. In their first years of exile, these Iranians were still hoping to return to Iran. They focused on the Persian language, publishing in Persian for Iranian communities of the diaspora and at home. The situation changed as the return to Iran proved to be a mirage, and Iranians abroad learned the languages of their new homes and in several cases became active participants

in the literary life of their new homelands. Examples include Kader Abdolah, who wrote several best-selling novels in Dutch, and Azar Nafisi, who wrote *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.²³

Karimi-Hakkak discusses the Iranians' experience of exile through the works of the prominent Iranian novelist Gholāmhossein Sā'edi (1936–1985). Most of the exiled Iranians, although young in heart, were not young when they left the country. Exile is a central theme in Persian mystical poetry, in which the expulsion of the human soul from its original abode and longing to return is depicted in spellbinding metaphors and allegories. The opening couplets of Rumi's (1207–1273) *Masnavi*, describing the reed torn from its reed-bed to form a flute, are used by Iranians to describe the emotions and experiences of exile. Karimi-Hakkak also refers to modern Persian authors such as Sādeq Hedāyat (1903–1951), Sā'edi's favourite author, who chose long periods of voluntary exile in Europe and in India. Karimi-Hakkak shows how the feeling of severance from 'home' led to works of art in which Iranians could find solace for their homesickness.²⁴ Exile generated anxiety and the fear of being torn apart, of not belonging to any community and being unable to communicate feelings and thoughts. Karimi-Hakkak describes this eloquently: "The result is a kind of writing in its helpless attempt to bring the world of an inner struggle to those who have experienced nothing of the pain that the struggle leaves behind, in its inadequacy to communicate, and consequently in the perception it gives to the reader of an unclear, inconsistent, and unstable relation with reality, reflects the trials and torments which plague the exilic mind."²⁵ Closely connected to the theme of exile are descriptions of the new environment, as well as the nightmare and memories of the offences and failures of the theocratic government, and worries about the uncertain future. These and other topics form the exile's existence. In his analysis of the stories, Karimi-Hakkak cogently examines how the author depicts the dehumanisation of the stories' characters, as a preparation for their torture and execution as "wild beasts," dangerous for the newly-founded Islamic state. The episodes in which Sā'edi depicts the skinning of live animals as a signifier for exile and his or her relation to home and to the new homeland are horrifying, but exemplary and significant for the way the Islamic government responded to dissidents.

A *leitmotiv* in Karimi-Hakkak's writings is his fascination with the continuity of certain topics in Persian poetry over a millennium, and how familiar motifs, metaphors, allegories and themes inexorably lead to the creation of new ones in a new situation, without losing their original sig-

nification.²⁶ In his “Revolutionary Posturing,” an original essay in which he discusses poetry in the political context of the Iranian Revolution, he wonders “why under certain social conditions, attempts at fresh articulations of such oppositions in communal myths and metaphors succeed in creating new cultural artifacts, while under other conditions the system of cultural constraints prevents such re-articulations from breaking through the complexities of discourse and erecting new structures for cultural expression.”²⁷ Such questions are essential to understanding the role of Persian poetry in Iranian society and how new significations can be added to a story. Among the fascinating examples Karimi-Hakkak offers is the myth of Kāveh the Ironsmith who rebels against the tyrannical mythical King Zahhāk, who had two serpents on his shoulders which he fed with the brains of Persian youths. Karimi-Hakkak demonstrates how such myths, transmitted in Ferdowsi’s *Shāh-nāme*h, were used during and after the Revolution, symbolising different persons and classes. While the Shah was at first seen as Zahhāk and Khomeini as a liberator of the Iranian people, the paradigm changed during the Revolution, as readers assigned different significations to the myth.

Reading Persian poetry in terms of continuity and creativity is a fruitful intellectual exercise for understanding its reception in a society in which poetry is part and parcel of everyday culture. Karimi-Hakkak’s approach to literature is also hermeneutic, in the sense that he includes the many possible perspectives in which a literary work is created, disseminated and appreciated. In the Persian case, due to the sociopolitical agencies, all perspectives have become components of the literary works, shaping the literary output of a nation in crisis and expressing ideological exigencies. Characterising Karimi-Hakkak’s work, K. Talattof rightly observes:

believing in the intimacy between facts and interpretation in literature, Karimi-Hakkak ... proposes an alternative hermeneutic for explaining literary preoccupations with social agencies, political activities, or cultural institutions in each specific text, a hermeneutic that does not necessarily start with reflection upon text-context relationships, a hermeneutic that takes into consideration the significance of literary social structures.²⁸

As a participating scholar in the historical events in Iran, his writings show his ardent desire for change in essential matters such as human rights, freedom of expression, and the fair treatment of individuals irrespective

of their ethnic or religious backgrounds. For instance, his essay on the Writers' Association passionately and scrupulously chronicles the evil of censorship, the creation of the Association for the sake of freedom of expression, and the imprisonment of political writers. In these essays, Karimi-Hakkak shows how the literary activities, the intellectual role of literati, and their literary output played a cardinal role in creating a revolutionary discourse leading to the collapse of the monarchy and the rise of theocracy. The famous literary gatherings at the Goethe Institute in Tehran were instrumental in the formation of a revolutionary discourse. Karimi-Hakkak says, "A glance at the literary works written between the Ten Nights of poetry reading and speeches at the Goethe Institute in Tehran in October 1977 and the consummation of the Iranian revolution in February 1979 reveals that literature, especially poetry, became more kinetic, more image-oriented, and much more buoyant."²⁹ Perhaps nowhere in modern times was the relationship between literature and politics as close as in Iran in the two decades preceding the 1979-Revolution. The results were the flight of intellectuals and a more vigilant censorship after the Revolution. In Karimi-Hakkak's persuasive summary, "Defeated and drained, Association members were forced to choose between exile at home or migration abroad, between emotional or physical homelessness."³⁰

Much more could be said about the individual chapters of this book, as each chapter unfolds a new aspect of modern Iranian political history and how the literati responded to political events despite oppression, censorship, threats, and even execution. As a member of the Persian Studies community, I should profusely thank Dr Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak for writing these invaluable chapters, which are now collected in one volume for the first time. I hope the reader will enjoy reading the book as much as I have enjoyed reading it and benefiting from it for my own research.

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