

Interrelation of history and nationhood in contemporary Persian historical fiction

The present article discusses how terrains of belonging are constructed and articulated textually through historical novels which bring the past into the present, and link the national identity of people to memories of their ancestors, to their nation's glorious past. The rise of the historical novel in Iran was concomitant with Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which was hailed by many a critic and historian as a major time of sociopolitical awakening which contributed to protecting the cultural legacies of the past and keeping aglow the propitious light of belonging and nationhood. Historiography has been a fecund ground for Iranian fiction-writers in which to retrieve a sense of national identity. This article aims at showing how Persian historical novels foreground the symbiotic relationship between remembering and belonging, and open up texts to their national significances.

Keywords: Persian historical novel, the nation, the Constitutional Revolution, historiography.

В статье рассматривается вопрос, как принадлежность к конкретной национальности отражается в текстах исторических романов, которые переносят прошлое из настоящего и связывают национальную идентичность людей с воспоминаниями об их предках, со славным прошлым их нации. Расцвет исторического романа в Иране совпал с Конституционной революцией 1906 г., которая была расценена многими критиками и историками как важнейший период социально-политического пробуждения, способствовавшего защите культурного наследия прошлого и сохранению национальной идентичности и принадлежности национальному государству. Историография была плодородной почвой для иранских писателей, на которой они могли восстановить чувство национальной идентичности. Цель настоящей статьи — показать, как персидские исторические романы, выдвигая на первый план симбиотические отношения между воспоминанием и принадлежностью к своему народу, приобретают национальное значение.

Ключевые слова: персидский исторический роман, нация, конституционная революция, историография.

Introduction

The power and appeal of nationhood as a cultural force has begun to be examined by scholars from different disciplines since the 1960s, following the era of decolonization¹. Not long after the end of the World War II decolonization struggles started openly. Colonized states in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific islands began declaring their independence. Posterior to the decline and fall of empires and the ensuing decolonization, and following the massive rush of immigration from formerly colonized peripheries to imperial centers, there emerged a growing anxiety of belonging which encouraged, or rather compelled, people of different countries to rethink their national identity.

Nationhood is plainly the most forceful collective identity in our time; it unites people and secures “a social bond between individuals and classes by providing repertoires of shared values, symbols and traditions” [7. P. 16]. It is however important to notice that national identity usually calls upon history and the national past. Although historical fiction does not claim to be considered equal to historiography, it surely reflects aspects of national belonging. The historical novel is a mirror of the past of a nation. Such novels depict the stories, customs and habits, intellectual and moral developments of nations. Historical fiction teaches national characteristics by delight. One may learn more of a nation's past by reading a historical novel than they might learn by perusing blunt, serious historiographical pieces. This defines the purpose of the present article. Historical fiction is the narration of nation which, according to Homi K. Bhabha (1949), takes shape through *imagi-Nation* [2. P. 1]. Mineke Schipper in “National Literatures and Literary History” (1987) argues that literature has contributed to the development of national feelings [6. P. 282]. Therefore, novels, like many other literary or artistic forms, can strengthen or undermine national identity.

¹ Particularly in Britain in the late 1960s and the 1970s a group of political theorists (including, most famously, Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson) began to question British national culture and criticize it for its theoretical inertia. Anderson in “Components of the National Culture” (1968) and Nairn in *The Break-up of Britain* (1977) argued a need for English nationalism. Nairn noticed “the symptom of an *absence* of popular nationalism among the English”.

In Persian literature, the novel is a young genre that has received serious attention since its emergence, which was approximately at the time of the Constitutional Revolution between 1905 and 1911. During these years, the Iranian nation strived to bring about constitutional reforms; however, with the outbreak of World War I, Iran became a stage of externally imposed and unwanted conflicts, which resulted in nationwide famine, epidemics, poverty and corruption. Thus the fulfillment of constitutional reforms lagged behind their initial promise. Moreover, the post-Revolutionary states always moved in opposition to the wishes of the people and became more and more corrupt as they transmogrified into a plaything of colonial powers. The historical novel appeared in this critical period as the most prominent literary genre, and they artistically celebrated the great men and women who once served their country and were 'saviors' of Iran at one point in history. *Dāstān-e Bāstān* [A Story of the Ancient Times] (1920) by Mirzā Hasan Khān Badi' (1872–1937) and *Salahshūr* [The Warrior]² (1924) by Abdul-hoseyn San'ati-zade Kermānī (1895–1973) are two such novels; the former depicts the life and deeds of Cyrus the Great (d. 530 BC), the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, and the latter describes the heroic exploits of Ardashīr Bābakān (d. 242 AD), the founder of the Sasanian Empire.

The rise of the Persian historical novel

In Europe the rise of the historical novel followed the decline of the traditional feudal system, the rise of the middle class, and the emergence of nationalism;

the beginning of the historical novel is linked to the emergence of nation-states and the awakening of national(-ist) sentiments, which are intrinsically aftermath of the late 18th century social turmoils, particularly the 1789 French Revolution, that made history, for the first time, a mass experience. This increasing historical awareness reached its peak after the fall of Napoleon (1814). It is no accident that Scott's *Waverley* – usually considered the first [English] historical novel – appeared right about the time, when Britain was a victorious [imperial] nation [3. P. 48].

In the same vein, the rise of the historical novel in Iran was concomitant with Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1906, which was hailed by many a critic and historian as a major time of sociopolitical awakening.³

In the years leading up to the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), at the very beginning of the twentieth century, many literary circles emerged in different corners of Iran, and modern authors, firmly opposed to court poets who were given to translating the ideology of feudal aristocracy, tried their hands at writing novels – the new literary genre whose audience were the working-class people, not the nobility. These novelists were the main activists of the 'literary revolution,' and their first task was to break away from the usual feudal themes and the old hackneyed forms and subjects. They also tried to create a distinct, more relaxed language for their own work, a language which had nothing to do with the grandiloquent, archaic language of the elite. It was not possible to introduce new themes using the old literary language. The language of classical literature, with its rigorous formulations, could not be used by novel-writers. They sought for a vernacular language in order to let the masses read and imagine themselves as members of a national community.

The historical novel should also be seen as a result of the cultural efforts of Dār al-Fonūn and its teachers. Dār al-Fonūn was the first modern academy or institution of higher learning in Iran which was established in 1851 by Mirzā Taqī Khān Amīr Kabīr (1807–1852), grand vizier to Nāseruddin Shāh (r. 1848–1896) of the Qajar Dynasty. Among the disciplines taught in the polytechnic academy of Tehran were history and foreign languages. The latter helped many scholars to embark on translating artistic and scientific books into Persian and thus paving the way of modernization.

² The preface to this novel is worthy of attention as it is a short manifesto of socialist novels. It argues in favor of the revolutionary and reformist function of the novel.

³ Edward Granville Browne (1862–1926) effectively described it as "an Iranian awakening – drawing explicit comparisons with the Italian Risorgimento" [1. P. 1].

The first pieces of Persian historical fiction reflect the prime role of translation and the influence of translated literary pieces on the novelistic experiments of Iranian writers. The Iranian writers come to know the stylistic rules, forms, and manners of fiction-writing through studying and emulating the translated western novels. Among the first examples of historical fiction which were translated into Persian and influenced Iranian writers were Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (trans. Muhammad Tāher Mirzā (1834–1900)), Alain Rene Lesage's *Gil Blas* (trans. Mirzā Habīb Esfahānī (1835–1893)), Francois Fenelon's *The Adventures of Telemachus* (trans. Mirzā Āgha Khān Kermānī (1854–1896)), Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's *Paul and Virginia* (trans. Ebrāhīm Neshāt), George W. M. Reynolds' *The Virgin's Kiss* (trans. Seyyed Hoseyn Sadr al-Ma'ālī Shīrāzī (d. 1917)), and Jurji Zaydan's *Egyptian Armansura* and *Battle of Karbala* (trans. Abdul-Hoseyn Mirzā) [5. P. 111–112].

European-style romances and novels had no precedent in Iranian literature until 130 or 140 years ago, when Western culture found its way into Iran via translation. One has to wait until 1895, the year Zeyn-al-Ābedīn Marāghe'ī (1839–1910) published *The Travel Diary of Ebrāhīm Beyg* in Istanbul, to speak of the first pseudo-novel in Persian literature. A decade later, *Masālek al-Mohsenin* [The Ways of the Charitable] by Abdul-Rahīm Tālebof was published. The authors of these novels provided historical information while also producing interesting literary stories. The popularity of this kind of fictional pieces encouraged more writers to try their hand at composing historical novels which reflected an archaic nationalism.

The years following the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) witnessed a rapid growth in the composition and publication of Persian historical fiction. It was a time of literary transition from mythological love stories and moral tales to modern-day novels. Iranian intellectuals strived to relate to national history in order to promote shared national sentiments among the common folk.

The historical novel and national identity

Representations of the past and rewritings of history are of great moment in establishing and propagating a sense of national identity and belonging: “Historical novels are not only the legitimate progeny of a nation's becoming conscious of its own identity, they also contribute to fortify that nationalist discourse” [3. P. 46]. The writing of historical pieces is a manner of contemplating upon contemporary issues and conveying “*sentiment de l'existence*” of an era, “the feeling of how it was to be alive in another age”. According to Avram Fleishman, historicism, and studying of the path of the past, is a “peculiarly national affair” [4. P. 18–19]. There is thus a reciprocal relationship between history and the nation. On one side, history reveals national identity and its distinctive features and identifications in various epochs, and on the other side, the nation owns its survival and continuation to history for re-membling and protecting the sense of belonging and nationhood.

Historical novels help bring to the fore characteristics and qualities shared by all members of a society (e. g. language, religion, myths, tradition, values). These elements are internalized by the members of a society who are usually not conscious of them.

The nation is a lived experience, and the historical novel is indeed a narration of such a rich experience where the “scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects” [2. P. 297]. The nation is a form of identification; the production of the nation as narration in historical novels provides the writers with such a plenteous cultural repository from which to draw their material.

The historical novel in Iran could well be categorized with reference to two historically influential revolutions: the Constitutional (1905–1911) and the Islamic (1979). The first type is usually informed and inspired by archaic nationalism, and the very first instances measure up more to romance than to proper novels, although every now and then some novels of character come into view, such as *Dāstān-e Bāstān* by Muhammad-Hasan-Khān Badī'. In these historical novels of pre-modern era the emphasis is upon the events or adventures that the hero undertakes on their historical quest. They reflect, through heroic romances, the glories of a nation's past.

The rise of realism (and later on naturalism) as a movement in Iranian literary scene — which was reflected mostly in fiction-writing — impeded the development of historical novels. The economic austerity and sociopolitical crises led many writers to commit to social causes; they had to address the dire reality of everyday life and had thus no time for historical romances.

When we move on to the modern era and consider the modernist style of narration, we witness a meaningful shift in approaching history. Modern historical novels are not about history *per se* but the consciousness of history. The writers of these historical novels did not put their pens to paper with this idea in mind of creating a detailed historiographic piece. They treated history as it was received in the minds of their characters. This type of historical novels were written mostly after the Islamic Revolution, and some of them even touch on the postmodern literature and draw on historiographic metafiction. Moniro Ravānipour's *Del-e Fūlād* [*Heart of Stone*] (1990), Hamīdrezā Shāhābādī's *Dilmāj* [*The Interpreter*] (2006), Qāsem Shokri's *Mārmūlak-i ke Māh rā Bal'id* [*The Lizard Who Swallowed the Moon*] (2009), Hoseyn Sanāpūr's *Shamāyel-e Tārik-e Kākh-hā* [*Dark Shades of Palaces*] (2009), and Mahdī Yazdānī Khorram's *Man Manchester United rā Dūst Dāram* [*I Love Manchester United*] (2012). These novels also evince historical and cultural dimensions of Iranian national identity, though the focus of this article is on the first category of historical novels, namely, historical romances.

Shams and Toghrā (1905) is considered to be the first historical novel in Persian literature; it is written by Muhammad Bāgher Mirzā Khosravī (1847–1919). The author, who was a forerunner of modern Persian prose, wrote the novel when his city of origin (Kermānshāh) was occupied by Russian forces. He thus desired to write a story which showed that the night of oppression would be ended by the twilight of peace and independence. He tries to introduce himself as a historian, not a novelist, in order to make his narrative more believable. The novel is a story of love and adventure which pictures the tumultuous period of Mongol rule over Iran. The Atabakans were a dynasty of monarchs in Fars, founded by Salghar. Shams al-Din, the hero of the novel, is an Iranian prince who marries Toghrā, the daughter of a powerful Mongol ruler. The novel ends with the death of Arghun Khān and his sinister vizier Sa'd al-Dowleh who was Jewish and hated Iranian Muslims. Finally, peace is restored, and the light of hope wins over the darkness of tyranny.

Another of the earliest Persian historical novels was *Love and Kingship or the Conquests of Cyrus the Great* by Sheikh Musa Kabūdar-Āhangī (1881–1953), which was published in Hamadan in 1919. The author has attempted to create a historical and educational novel which relates the exploits of King Cyrus of the Achaemenid dynasty. The historical information is based on the narratives of the Greek historian Herodotus.

Another historical novel is *The Ensnarers, or the Avengers of Mazdak*, written by Homāyūn San'atizāde Kermānī in two volumes. The first volume was published in Mumbai in 1882, and received the attention of Edward Browne, the famous British orientalist, and the second volume was published in Tehran in 1887. The main purpose of this story was to show that the ethos and habits of Iranians in the late Sassanid era were so corrupted that they were on the road to decline. In this novel, the author briefly takes us to the reign of Khosrow Anūshīrvān and then describes the painful fate of the Mazdakites; he later regrets the sad period of Yazdgerd's reign, the incompetent last Sasanian monarch who lost the crown of Persia to Arab invaders.

In another historical novel, *Mazālem-e Torkān Khātūn* (1927), Heydar-Ali Kamālī (1869–1936) describes the Mongol invasion of Iran which resulted in barbaric oppression and bloodshed. The novel regretfully pictures the final years of the reign of Sultan Muhammad II of Khwārazm (ca. 1220). It shows how his mother (Torkān Khātūn) interfered in the affairs of the state and decided for his son, which ultimately led to the downfall of the country. Kamālī's second historical novel, *Lāzīkā* (1931), is a description of conflicts and wars between the Romans and Anūshīrvān in a region called Lazika on the Black Sea coast. In this historical novel, Kamālī depicts the last years of the Sassanid rule.

Muhammad-Hoseyn Roknzādeh Ādamīyat (1899–1973) wrote the very famous classic novel *Dalīrān-e Tangestān* [*Braves of Tangestān*] (1931) in order to describe the events that had taken place during the First World War in southern Iran and published it serially in *Kūshesh*. The novel eulogizes the bravery

of the people of southern Iran — Tangestān, in Būshehr province — who sacrificed their lives to expel the trespassing British colonizers from Iranian soil.

Shahr-bānū (1931), written by Ali-Asghar Rahīmzāde Safavī, was another serialized historical novel which was published in installments in *Setāre-ye Iran* newspaper. The novel laments the doomed transition of power from the Sassanid rulers to the incompetent Samanid kings who finally surrendered to the invasion of the Arabs.

Between 1930 and 1937, Zeyn al-Ābedīn Mo'tamen (1914–1989) wrote the novel *The Eagle's Nest* and published it serially in several installments in *Shafagh* newspaper. The adventures of this thousand-page novel are based on the rivalry between Khwaja Nezām al-Molk (1018–1092), vizier of the Seljuk Empire, and Hasan Sabbāh (1050–1124), founder of the Nezārī Īsma'īlī state, for the power grab at the court of a Seljuk King. *The Eagle's Nest* is a true example of a popular story during the reign of Rezā Shāh. In this novel, the lawless rebels are hated as enemies of the nation who have tried to ruin the status quo.

Conclusion

Historical fiction justifies and perpetuates specific social and national beliefs and thus reinforces emotional attachment to a place, to the native country. Through reading historical novels, we learn about the social and political history of the Iranian people and their lifestyle, food, clothing, weapons, speech, ethics, customs, habits, intellectual and moral developments, celebrations and culture, agriculture and commerce.

Persian historical novel with its popularity helped familiarize Iranian readers with the new genre of the novel, and paved the way for subsequent novelistic experiments. Also, with the advent of the historical novel, the language of contemporary prose became simpler and closer to everyday language. It proved that ordinary language could well be used in creating serious works of literature, and liberated literature from grandiloquent and pompous style of the Qajar era. More importantly, the historical novel contributed to protecting the cultural legacies of the past and keeping aglow the propitious light of belonging and nationhood. Overall, historiography has been a fecund ground for Iranian fiction-writers in which to retrieve a sense of national identity.

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