

## Post-Revolutionary Iranian Novel

Dr. Bahram Meghdadi

دکتر بهرام مقصدادی استاد دانشکده زبانهای خارجی

Although novel as a genre had evolved in Europe and the United States since 1914 and has moved from "objectivity" to "subjectivity", The Iranian novel, including Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* and a few other works by Golshiri and Golestan, has mainly been an imitation of the nineteenth century European realism. Even after the 1979 revolution, most Iranian writers of fiction have adhered to the tradition of social realism. The main reason for this static condition is that, contrary to poetry which has a long historical background in Iran and therefore has evolved historically, novel as a new genre, which has recently emerged in this country as a result of cultural interaction with the west, has not had a chance to be assimilated in the Iranian culture. Consequently, the majority of post - revolutionary Iranian novels simply report socio - political conditions. However, there has emerged a third generation of Iranian novelists, among whom Abbas Maroofi, author of *The Syphony of the Dead* can be cited, as a key figure in creating fiction by using the stream of consciousness - technique. Therefore, we can conclude that the "modern psychological novel" is beginning to emerge in post - revolutionary Iran.

### **Key Words:**

genre . objectivity . subjectivity . European realism . social realism . static . cultural interaction . report . socio-political . stream of consciousness . modern psychological novel.

The large number of novels published since the 1979 revolution in Iran bears evidence enough to the fact that the genre has been steadily flourishing. However, a survey of the content of post - revolutionary Iranian novels would reveal that they lack the very characteristics which differentiate the novel as a distinct genre. Compared with the English novel, which has a history of almost two hundred years, the Iranian novel seems to be but a premature, deformed infant. As opposed to the English novel, which was born in the eighteenth century and soon acquired a status of its own which distinguished it from other literary forms, especially the romance, the Iranian novel has by and large an imported identity which is necessarily distorted and stripped of its essentials.

The essence of the early English novel which helped it acquire an independent identity of its own was that in different ways it directed the reader's attention to the real world. Up to the eighteenth century, the romance had always presented the reader with an escape from the real world. It was always stocked with characters and settings that were never intended to seem real; consequently, the people inhabiting the typical romance world were endowed with absolute good or bad qualities. In sharp contrast, the novel's characters were seldom portrayed in black and white, for the novelist's prime objective was to depict and imitate reality.

In order to make them seem real, characters in the novel were given proper names: Tom Jones, Joseph Andrews, etc. Identifying characters with proper names is not an innovation of the novel. As Ian Watt points

out:

Characters in previous forms of literature, of course, were usually given proper names; but the kind of names actually used showed that the author was not trying to establish his characters as completely individualised entities. The precepts of classical and Renaissance criticism agreed with the practice of their literature in preferring either historical names or type names. In either case, the names set the characters in the context of a large body of expectations primarily formed from past literature, rather than from the context of contemporary life.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, plot in the novel is much more cohesive than the non-causal series of events which make up the plot of the romance. The prime objective of the novelist, as noted above, is to create the illusion of reality. It, therefore, follows that the sequence of incidents should be rendered as plausible as possible, so that the reader would regard the ultimate course of action as inevitable. As Ian WATT has stated:

The novel's plot is also distinguished from most previous fiction by its use of past experience as the cause of present action: a causal connection operating through time replaces the reliance of earlier narratives on disguises and coincidences, and this tends to give the novel a much more cohesive structure.<sup>2</sup>

During the nineteenth century the novel was still formally realistic. Romanticism in the novel (initiated in England by the Bronte sisters) attempted to pay more attention to internal reality, i.e., the inner self of characters and their emotions. As a result, the point of view was usually first - person, and certain almost supernatural elements were introduced too.

At the end of the nineteenth century the French author Emile Zola

---

1. Ian WATT: THE RISE OF THE NOVEL. The Hogarth Press. London 1987, 18.

2. Ibid., 22.

gave rise to naturalism. He emphasized that the naturalist author should study his subject through the same procedure as that of a scientist. That was what he himself did when writing *Germinal*.

In the twentieth century the impact of modernism left its mark on fiction, among other genres, and the novel underwent what John FLETCHER and Malcolm BRADBURY call "a radical revolution in technique":

Among some of its most important practitioners, the novel's degree of self - analytical presentation markedly increased; its obsessions with its own tactics of structure and design grew; it became markedly more 'poetic', in the sense that it became more concerned with precision of texture and form...<sup>1</sup>

The basic characteristics of the modern novel are as follows:

1. The emphasis is shifted from external action to the inner life of characters.
2. The artistic aspect of the novel becomes more important; in other words, the novelist tries to make the structure of his novel most harmonious.
3. Characters are to be known rather than judged.
4. Characters gain a symbolic value as well; that is, they are not merely imaginary creatures but they also symbolize certain ways of life.
5. Setting is symbolic of characters and their inner moods.
6. There is no chronological order in the structure of the plot.
7. The story is not *reported*; it is *rendered* artistically. The modern novelist takes X-rays of the events while the traditional novelist submitted a photographic representation of the episodes.

As it is obvious from the above account of the novel's emergence as a distinct literary form, it has undergone a long process of development and arrived at a certain identity of its own. In contrast, the Iranian novel

---

1. John FLETCHER and Malcolm BRADBURY: «The Introverted Novel». In: Modernism. Ed. by Malcolm BRADBURY and James MCFARLANE. Penguin Books. London 1976, 394.

has never had such a historical process of refinement and, as a result, is lagging behind in several aspects.

One of the main shortcomings which is easily detectable in the vast majority of post-revolutionary Iranian novels is the lack of technical expertise regarding narrative devices. Few Iranian authors display artistic handling of such elements as point of view, characterization, plot, conflict, etc. As regards characterization, for instance, they heavily rely on "telling" rather than "showing", assuming it their duty to supply the reader with all the information about their characters. In other words, they cannot make use of the *dramatic* portrayal of characters, i.e., engaging them in certain situations and reporting dialogue without authorial or third - person narrator intrusion. The way a character behaves at times of crisis is self - revealing and the author who adopts "showing" instead of "telling" as a technique, leaves it to the reader himself / herself to make judgements as to the make - up of each character. In this sense, the novel is actually created only when it has succeeded in involving the active participation of the reader in the process of reading. Post-revolutionary Iranian novels, however, are ready-made stuff that has to be swallowed whole, never chewed or digested.

Another defect of post-revolutionary Iranian novels is their overt and often excessive orientation towards political issues. Needless to say there can be no justifiable objection to any author dealing with political matters. One can certainly find European novels which deal with political aspects of life in western societies. The problem with Iranian authors is that, rather than being interested in or attentive to the political history of Iran, they are *preoccupied* with it. Reading such authors' novels, one has a feeling that they could have been first-rate political essayists if only they had realized that fiction is not the right medium for expressing - and at times explicitly advocating their political views.

A notorious example which indeed epitomizes almost all of the above

mentioned weaknesses is Ahmad AGHAIE's newly published novel *Decoration in the Wind*. The majority of the characters in this novel are flat and static. In just two or three sentences one can sum each of them up, and it is easier still to pass value-judgements on them for the simple reason that the author has described them all to explicitly. What is more, the novelist has actually falsified the political history of Iran during the movement for the nationalization of the oil industry in order to give a desired turn to the course of the events which make up the loose plot of the novel.

The bulk of such defects in post-revolutionary Iranian novels could be traced back to a mistaken conception of realism held by the vast majority of contemporary Iranian authors. Realism itself is not the only and ultimate method of art. It is only one method, one great stream which has its marked limitations, shortcomings, and conventions. The pitfall of realism lies not so much in the rigidity of its conventions and exclusions as in the likelihood that it might, supported as it is by its theory, lose all distinction between art and the conveyance of information. When the novelist attempts to be a sociologist or propagandist he produces simply bad art, dull art; he displays his inert materials and confuses fiction with "reportage" and "documentation". In its lower reaches, realism constantly declines into journalism, treatise writing, scientific description, in short into non-art. The theory of realism is ultimately bad aesthetics because all art is "making" and a world in itself of illusion and symbolic forms. One of the few writers who could be exempted from such a mistaken notion of realism is the largely ignored regional short - story writer and novelist Ahmad MAHMOOD. His work displays due attention to the inner life of his characters and their motives. Rather than concentrating on the *how* of the incidents, he indirectly encourages the reader to think about the *why* of the events. he also makes skillful use of interior monologue and the stream of consciousness technique and like so many of modern English novels, his novels often have an open ending.

In the post-revolutionary Iranian novel, the predominant theme is social oppression and the victimization of the individual. *Kelidar* by Mahmood DOLATABADI can be considered a work which demonstrates the everlasting war of classes. Several heroes in this novel struggle for peace in a similar perspective to Tolstoy. DOLATABADI's treatment of the subject in his fiction is realistic. He presents political determinism under the social layer of the story very skillfully. His heroes are not able to change the cycle of feudalism and are thus victimized. It seems that in this type of novel, facts become more important than the characters; hence politics plays a minor role in his works. The same thesis can be seen in *The Absence of Salooch*, where he portrays the impact of the land reform project on the lives of the farmers.

In reference to subjective post-revolutionary novels, one may cite the works of T. MODARESI, who is not a new figure but a prominent one in modern Persian fiction. Although the background of his stories is social and real, Modaresi focuses on the problems of the individual in works such as *The Book of the Absent People* and on mysticism in *The Rituals of Pilgrimage*. *The Book of the Absent People* is the story of a social class that is present but no longer alive. In a psychological dimension, he expresses the isolation of a social class. *The Rituals of Pilgrimage* is a philosophical treatment of the notions of death and revival. Like his first novel, *Yakolia and her Solitude*, this novel depicts man's loneliness and alienation in the world. Destroyed in his spiritual journey, the character gradually attains self-awareness through revelation. The employment of myth and powerful images and the use of religious motifs reflect the writer's mystical inclinations.

Hooshang GOLSHIRI, a major contemporary Iranian novelist, believes: "Technique reveals the writer's world view. In evaluating a novel what is of importance to me is the kind of technique applied by the author."<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, he complains about "the lack of a clear concept

---

1. Hooshang GOLSHIRI: *Writing Novels Requires the Patience of Job*. Adineh, 50-51(Mehr1369),27.



of modern novel among the Iranian readers, which is a hinderance in their [writers'] artistic creation."<sup>1</sup> The observation of the above points by a major contemporary writer whose ideas are highly esteemed in Iranian literary circles marks the emergence of modern fiction in this country. Hooshang GOLSHIRI believes that some improvement can be seen in post-revolutionary Iranian novels. He points out that after 1979 the primary positive aspect of the Iranian novel was variety of style. What, however, distinguishes the novels written before and after the revolution is the emergence of new novelists since 1979. These new novelists, through the inspiration of European, North American and Latin American novelists, have tried to shake the foundations of fiction writing in Iran and to create new novels in terms of style and technique. Although in some instances mere imitations, the changes in the art of writing fiction suggest a transitional period in progress.

Abbas Maroofi belongs to the category of novelists who made their first appearance after the revolution. His major novel, *The Symphony of the Dead* stands out as a good novel among all other novels written since the revolution. Some critics have found thematic and structural analogues between this novel and *The Sound and the Fury* by William FAULKNER. Idin, the protagonist of the novel, falls victim to his businessman brother and this is exactly what has misled the Iranian critics in believing that it is a replica of *The Sound and the Fury*. What, however, marks a point of departure between *The Sound and the Fury* and *The Symphony of the Dead* is that in the latter it is the businessman who commits suicide and not the intellectual. Although financially secure and with a promising future ahead of him, when he fails to find Idin, he commits suicide, because Idin, though now insane, could have stopped his growing sense of loneliness. The miserable end he faces, especially after years of hard work, arouses sympathy in the reader and leads him to the central theme of man's need for sympathy.

---

1. Ibid., 31.



What makes the novel of more appeal to the reader is its delicate allusion to the legend of Bijan and Manijeh. Manijeh, as the legend has it, goes once a day to the well where Bijan is kept as prisoner and sends him food. Here, in the novel, Idin's beloved comes and, through the small window of his hiding-place, the cellar of a church, talks to him soothingly and gives him newspaper and food. All in all, considering the clarity of the language, the technical precision of the style and the poetic nature of the imagery on the one hand, and the cultural milieu of several decades ago in which the characters have been set on, the novel evokes admiration from the more fastidious readers.

Iran's new generation of novelists, of whom Abbas Maroofi is an example, have recognized the need to revolutionize the fiction of this country. In this regard, although the extent of their achievements is a matter of controversy among critics, the positive changes may suggest the emergence of a transitional period in the art of fiction after the revolution.





پښتونستان د علوم او انسانیت د مطالعاتو د مرکز  
پرتال جامع علوم انسانی