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The Tenets of Early Critical Writings on Fiction
in Iran

Yaser Farashahinejad*

PhD Student

Hormozgan University

y_farashahi@yahoo.com

Faramarz Khojasteh

Assistant Professor

Hormozgan University

faramarz.khojasteh@gmail.com

Majid Puyan

Assistant Professor

Hormozgan University

majid_puyan@yahoo.com

Abstract

Critics have not proved to be very interested in vigorous investigations of novel at the time of its conception as a new literary genre in Persian literary tradition over the period of five decades extending from the first commentaries of Akhundzadeh to Jamalzadeh's introduction to *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud*, i.e. 1872-1922. However, these writings can serve as the early manifestos of fiction in Iran. Although these remarks are quite scattered, they have moral concerns, realism and the value of fiction as their common themes. This can be explained by exploring the historical context and societal developments during the Constitutional period that demanded engagé literature. This study historically investigates the theoretical foundations of the first instances of fiction and its criticism in Iran and argues that they paved the way for the emergence and development of realism in Iran.

Keywords: Iranian novel, fiction criticism, realism, moral concerns, utilitarian functions of fiction

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* Corresponding Author

Introduction

Not only does novel as creative writing but also its reception and criticism have greatly evolved in their rather short history in Persian literary tradition. The study of this historical evolution reveals different epistemological, social and aesthetic developments not only on the part of novelists and critics but also among their audience. As Mirza Agha Tabrizi's letter to Fatali Akhundzadeh in 1250/1872 is a pioneering text referring to novel as an autonomous literary genre (Mirabedini 51), the 1870s can be considered to mark the inception of literary criticism concerned with fiction in Iran. Until the publication of *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* [Once upon a time] in 1300/1922, the critical literature on fiction was fairly scarce and lacked any cohering structure. Though disjunct, the total effect of this set of loosely connected writings mounted up to a kind of manifesto for fiction as a predecessor of a theory of novel in Iran.

This period did not feature clear definitions of and distinctions between novel, story, anecdote, tale and legend, so writers were prone to use these terms interchangeably; yet, this study delimits its scope to the critical commentaries exclusively mentioning novel. Although some of these works like Akhundzadeh's letters and Yusuf Khan Etesam Al-Molk's introduction to a translation of Friedrich Schiller's play seemingly discuss drama, their contents are mainly concerned with fiction. Moral concerns and the benefits of novel are the common issues that recur in these writings while they follow Hegel in their aesthetic conceptualizations. Concepts and thinking have pivotal roles in arts according to Hegel who believes that literature and art can be redefined and rendered as philosophy. This is while Kant limits sphere of theoretical reason's influence to sensory experiences and, as the result, paves the way for reflexive arts and literature, formalism and plurisignation. Pioneering theories of novel in Iran do not mention Hegel, but his ideas exert a conspicuous influence on these theories through their prevalence in the nineteenth century European criticism. Moreover, cultural circumstances, the pedigree of didactic literature, as well as the socio-political context were other determinants that promoted engagé literature in Iran.

Little attention has been paid to theories of novel in Iran despite their significance. In his *Piydāyīš-i rumān-i fārsī* [The Rise of Persian Novel] (1377/1998), Christophe Balay deduces some definitions for novel from the introductions to the translated versions of French novels. Iraj Parsi Nejad explores the ideas of Akhundzadeh and other pioneers of contemporary literature in his *Roshangaran-e Irani va Naghd-e Adabi* (Iranian intellectuals and literary criticism) (1380/2001), and Mohammad Dehghani analyzes the works of some early twentieth century critics in his *Pishgaman-e Naghd-e Adabi dar Iran* [The pioneers of criticism in Iran] (1380/2001). Kamran Sepehran, in his *Rad-e Pay-e Tazalzol* [tracing inconsistencies] (1381/2002), analyzes the introductions to some historical novels and points to the relationship between the nation and the State and its impact on novel in Iran. Abdul Ali Dastgheib mentions the excessive obsession of writers with theory during the 1340s. Ahmad Karimi Hakak investigates the roles of some journals such as *Bahar* [spring] and *Daneshkadeh* [college] in innovating and advancing contemporary Persian literature. Similarly, Mirabedini points to the influence of literary journals in the evolution of literary movements.

Early critical remarks on fiction, however, have not yet been assessed. The tension between realism and modernism go back to the forties in Iran. Figures including Sirus Parham (doctor Mitra) and Tabari defended realism for a long time while they denied modern literature. Meanwhile, modernism emerged from realism mainly due to the attempts by Najafi, Golshiri and others who revolted against realism during the forties. As opposed to the proponents of realism who thought of literature merely as a means of political struggle especially in terms of communist politics, modernists focused their attention primarily on form. But this excessive formalism allowed realists to accuse modernists to be the puppets of capitalism. Due to space restraints, however, this article delimits its scope to the investigation and analysis of the scattered critical remarks on fiction between 1250 and 1300 (1872-1922) while concentrating on the social and historical context for the rise of novel in Iran.

The Socio-historical Context

Since the time of ancient Iran, intentionality has always been an important feature in tales and legends. In fact, the didactic nature of *Andarz-Name* [book of counsels], a Pahlavi text, has influenced its successor stories (Mirsadeghi 87). *Kelile Va Demne*, *Bustan* [the orchard or alternatively garden of fragrance], and *Masnavi-i Ma'navi* include tales that feature moral didacticism. Accordingly, early social novels, as influenced by classical literature, were also interested in didacticism (Mirabedini 466). The most important reason behind didacticism in novel, however, does not lie in the long pedigree of didactic literature in the Persian literary tradition but in the social context in which pioneering novel criticism was written. "Turn of the eighteenth century witnessed unprecedented developments in international politics that exerted a significant influence on the social and political situation in Iran, too. The Russian invasion of the Iranian territory in the last years of the eighteenth century, advances of Napoleon towards the East and his intentions for attacking India through passing Iran, the attempts if England to maintain its colonial dominance in Asia, and the struggles of Iran to preserve its territorial integrity and independence against foreign aggression were among the factors that inevitably dragged Iran into the arena of international politics" (Adamiyyat 20). Such interactions with the west facilitated the introduction of new ideas into Iran. As Aryan Pour also notes, "Western civilization was introduced into Iran due to military conflicts with Russia and the trips that Abbas Mirza, the competent son of Fath Ali Shah, took to Europe for military reasons. He did his best to promote modern European technology and industries in Iran" (Aryan Pour 5). As the result, Iran was inevitably derived to distance itself from its long cherished traditions and to seek innovations in various areas.

Iranian intellectuals championed the introduction of western civilization to Iran. Mirza Saleh Shirazi expresses his deeply felt exhilaration at witnessing advancements, civilization and liberty in England in his travelogue (Adamiyyat 23). Mirza Malcolm Khan was influenced by such thinkers as Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill (72). Akhundzadeh was interested in European realism (Aryan Pour 350) and Myrzaaqakhan Kermani manifested

socialist inclinations in his writings (Balay and Cuypers 44). Obviously, their creative and critical works could not be indifferent to the social conditions of their times.

Constitutional intellectuals believed that the country's condition could be improved by changing the themes dominant in romance and lyric to political ones (Mirabedini 19). In these circumstances and "with the advent of new cultural institutions, novel rose in Iran in the nineteenth century" (Sepehran 9). It soon turned into an intentional instrument for promoting the intellectual cause. As a new comer, however, it required the lapse of time to gain enough prestige as a competitor against the already well-established poetry of the constitutional period. "In order to respond to the challenges they faced, novelists focused on the realistic and didactic aspects of their novels to distinguish them from the kind of literature that was produced only to entertain and amaze readers (and from which scholars were expected to refrain)" (Mirabedini 196). Realism and intentionality of novel, therefore, served as a response to the social conditions following the Constitutional Movement of Iran. In the year following the Constitutional Revolution, there was a surge of translation into Persian only to be followed by the production of native novels. "These works were written to serve the cause of modernism. Novel was a means towards enlightenment and every novel contained a message. The early novel, particularly, shared the properties of didactic literature" (Gheissari 12-11). This very idealism and vogue for modernism, which led to the reformation of the political structure and facilitated social development, also increasingly challenged the moral foundations of the traditional society and made pioneering novelists turn to moral concerns (Kamshad 74). Accordingly, realism and intentionality were the two common topics in the criticism of novel in Iran. This made committed literature the dominant discourse of literary criticism in Iran for a long time.

Like the case of Europe, sentimental and romantic novels preceded realist novels in Iran, too (Sepehran 26). Two reasons can justify this: first, Iranians turned to French literature due to their political problems with England and Russia (Balay 12); second, similarities between the Constitutional Revolution and the French Revolution attracted Iranians to

French literature (Karimi-Hakkak 194). This, however, should not mislead us to assume that Iranian novelists have merely imitated French romantic novels. Despite the French romantic influence, Iranian novelists emphasized realism and intentionality in novel. In Mirabedini's words, "although the emergence of modern Iranian fiction was influenced by translations of European works, it was not the direct result of these translations. Rather, it was associated with the experience of modernity in Iran" (Mirabedini 13). Moreover, as Balay also notes, "Voltaire, Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, Countess Dosgor and Fénelon were among the first writers whose works were translated and published in Iran since 1279. Apparently, these figures did not have much in common. Considering the socio-political situation in Iran, however, it can be understood that all these writers featured awareness" (Balay 70-69). In other words, as Iranians turned to the west and attempted to penetrate and appropriate the western culture in order to compensate for their own backwardness, Iranian writers also inclined toward didactic literature (Balay 69-70). Therefore, the socio-political situation of the constitutional era and its aftermath led to prioritization of enlightenment and didacticism over art and the aesthetics as the primary goals of novel and its criticism. Pseudo-romantic tendencies mixed with a kind of realism led authors to attempt to improve their society. This trend continued even in the time of Reza Shah Pahlavi when "Writers including Moshfeq Kazemi, Hejazi, Jalili, and Masoud, among others, who feared imprisonment and assassination, were influenced by European Romantic literature. They sought to solve social problems through correcting their fellow human beings by means of promoting humanitarian sentiments and ethics in their didactic works" (Mirabedini 71).

Pioneering Criticisms of Novel in Iran

The sum of scattered commentaries published in letters, introductions of novels, and some literary journals hardly can provide a comprehensive theory of novel, yet they are significant because they can still shed light on the conception of a theory of novel and its criticism in Iran. Despite their incoherence, moral concerns, realism and beneficial intentionality of novel are among their common themes. In other words, Hegelianism dominated the

criticism of fiction in Iran as it did in the nineteenth century Europe. Dehqani argues that intellectual sphere was dominated by positivism in this period. "Positivist research and critical methods emerged almost half a century before the Constitutional Revolution as the result of Akhoondzadeh's efforts and culminated during the quarter of a century span between the constitutional revolution and September the ninth (Shahrivar 1320)" (Dehqani 10). This statement can hold true in case of Bahar's and Qazvini's criticisms, but it does not apply to the criticism of novel and Akhundzadeh's commentaries. As critics mostly concentrate on the morality and intentionality of novel rather than its literary analysis, they can be said to be inclined towards idealism rather than the intellectual principles of positivism. In fact, "the Hegelian methodology for the study of arts is not empirical and is not endorsed by empiricists and positivists" (Mojtahedi 122).

Certain intellectuals like Malcolm Khan were influenced by the positivist ideas of Auguste Comte, but Akhundzadeh followed idealism. Akhundzadeh was the first critic who commented on stories, plays and novels. In a letter, he writes, "Drama is intended to edify and teach its audience" (Akhundzade 66). In yet another letter to Gharachedaghi, he writes, "a criticism free of fault-finding, reprehension, mockery and ridicule is not feasible. The writings of Kamal al-Dole are critical pieces rather than preaching. The texts that are written for the purpose of paternal exhortation, rather than criticism, cannot affect the human beings accustomed to misdeeds. Actually, people dislike hearing or reading advice and exhortations" (Akhundzadeh 8). His attitude in providing advice to his readers in his critical pieces actually betrays his attempts to distinguish advice and criticism. Anyway, his conceptualization of the intentionality of drama and criticism is very similar to the Hegelian emphasis on content. Akhundzadeh's ideas paved the way for committed realism in Iran.

The introduction to the translation of *Three Musketeers* (1898) by Muhammad Tahir Mirza, the renowned translator of the Qajar period, includes yet another interesting comment on fiction. "Although this book is written in the manner of a legend," he writes, "it is not totally unfounded and false (unlike other legends) as most of its characters are life-like and have

actually existed. Moreover, its events have also actually taken place. Only does the writer narrate the story in a manner that pleases his readers. This technique is popular in Europe where it is called historical novel and it represents history as fiction" (Tahir Mirza 1). In the Persian original, he employs terms for fable, story and novel interchangeably. The important point in this introduction is his emphasis on the (historical) reality of the story because he considers purely fictitious tales as of no worth. Also, his referencing the definition of historical novels in the West conveys that he has borrowed his definition of novel from the Western sources because the genre had not existed in the Persian literary tradition. And the fact that he mentions realism shows he is rather familiar with the critical views of his time.

Almost a decade later, Yusuf Khan Etesam Al- Molk translates a play by Schiller. His introduction to this play suggests his socio-political and cultural context only demanded moral and serviceable fiction. In his introduction to Schiller's *Deceit and Love*, he writes, "although this book deals with sensory incidents and is free of exaggerations and fabulations, it pursues serious intentions and gives good advice" (Etesam Al- Molk 3). He attempts to distinguish his work from fabulation and insists on its moral intentions. In fact, he also mentions morality as his next concern when he writes, "in this play, Schiller promotes morality and ethics, praises chastity in women and condemns their ignorance, reveals the fragilities of jealousy, scorn and hypocrisy, elucidates the meaning and secrets of love. He insists to be human is to be free from the demands of the carnal self" (3-4). Not only does he insist on the moral aspect of the play he has translated, but he also underscores the significance of such works in his contemporary epoch. "In the contemporary age which features the advancement of the country, moral edification is of greatest importance. I hope this humble service of mine [i.e. the translation of a morally edifying work] will be welcomed by scholars" (3-4). Foregrounding the benefits of fiction, its moral and realist dimensions similarly recur in contemporary works.

Similar notions reverberate in other critical pieces belonging to that period. In his introduction to *Shams and Toqra*, Mohammad Baqer Khosravi states that this is a novel interspersed with historical, geographical and moral

materials written in 1907 (Khosravi 21). Likewise, Ibrahim Zanjani in the first part of *Hekayat-e Shahriyar-e Hooshmand* [The story of the wise prince] writes, "diffusing learning and sciences, and encouraging morality in people are the utmost favors one can do to his fellow human beings. And the most effective way to do so is by means of historical books and anecdotes that provides readers with both delight and instruction" (Zanjani 2). Writers frequently emphasized the moral and beneficial aspects of the novel, but those who disapproved of novel believed that novels were unrealistic and harmful.¹ This gave rise to socialist criticism that reached its apex during the thirties. Such criticism tended to reduce literature to a means of realizing party politics.

But these three principals were not just expressed in the introductions to translation and creative works. Realism and benefits of novel are also the major concerns in critical writings, too. Many articles defended and promoted realism in novel. *Bahar* journal featured an anonymous article, "Count Leo Tolstoy," for instance, where the author maintains, "Tolstoy is by no means comparable to Balzac, Flaubert and Zola. He heals humanity's deep wounds by applying knowledge and wisdom. He puts irritant cries and soft condolences side by side. Tolstoy's audience gets well aware of the painful facts of human life, its disasters and man's spiritual ailments" (85). Interestingly enough, the writer does not put Tolstoy on a par with Balzac, the greatest representative of realism; instead, he compares him with Flaubert as one of the first formalist writers. The author regards Tolstoy as a missionary who performs the actual duty of a genuine artist.

This anonymous author's attention to realism and benefits of art in Tolstoy can also be traced in yet another article published in the *Daneshkadeh* [college] journal. In his "Literary History," Abbas Ashtiani writes, "Europeans also believe that excelling in poetry and prose epitomizes the apex of literature. However, they are quick to supplement another significant

¹In an article published in *Shafaq-e Sorkh* in 1304/1925, Ali Dashti regarded non-native novel as a deadly poison for women (See Rade Paye Tazalzol 38-40). In his arguments against novel in *Peyman* Journal, Ahmad Kasravi contends that novel is harmful for the masses because it is useless and unrealistic. See About novel, 8 and 9

point to complete this definition. Modern European scholars maintain that literature must include a critical spirit or "Revue" that should express the genuine aim of literature. That is to say, an author, poet or orator should be obliged by this spirit to poetically criticize any daily incidents, social defects or flaws of laymen and rulers that he may witness in a way that influences [and corrects] people" (Ashtiani 10). The influence of European literature reveals Ashtiani's tendency toward realism. He pursues his discussion by commenting on novel where he avers, "we know that novel and (allegorical narrative) are important genres in European literature that aim to concretely represent virtues and vices so that people are encouraged to adhere to morality" (10). Ashtiani believes that novel is a means to depict moral values and emphasizes realism and the discussion of social issues therein. His reference to European literature conveys he has been influenced by engagé literature and realism.

Saeed Nafisi has undertaken to write both creative and critical works on Persian literature. His "Alphonse Daudet" was published in the first issue of *Daneshkadeh* in 1917. In this article, Nafisi writes, "As soon as Daudet commenced to write, he realized that what is most noteworthy for a writer in the world is exactly what is frequently ignored as of little or no worth to all others. Accordingly, he depicted various castes as they actually were, that is to say plain and natural. He undertook to write accurately and thoughtfully, to describe people's faults as they live them. Romantic writers expressed their thoughts with futile inelasticity and indifference. But Daudet augmented sympathy towards fellow human beings and unease towards vices and corruptions" (Nafisi 33-32) This article is one of the most important defenses of realism which was correctly put against romanticism. The opposition between realism and romanticism was most articulately expounded in Sirus Parham's *Realism and Antirealism* in the early thirties. Later on, however, Nafisi completely altered his opinions with this regard and redirected toward modernism under the influence of European literature and socio-political developments of his milieu. In his introduction to *Farangis* (1310/1931), he asserts, "Never ask a writer what stimulated his writing of his books because he either does not know or has totally forgotten it. The swerves of his pen on

the paper are determined by his immediate impulses. As every word is written down, the impulse behind it fades to make room for the next impulse that stimulates the next word. As the work closes, all the intentions and impulses behind all its component words will soon vanish from the author's mind. If words appropriately translate the thoughts and impulses behind them, the work will enjoy eternal appeal. But in case the reader cannot discover the thoughts behind his/her words, even the author will fail to identify the exact motivation behind them" (Nafisi 4-5). Though Nafisi does not deny the distinction between thoughts and writing, his views still bear similarities with realism, romanticism and the modern notion of automatic writing. Nafisi changed his ideas and reconsidered his literary interests over a decade. This introduction actually marks this shift of interest toward modernism in his writings.

The period that pioneered novel criticism closes with Jamalzadeh's controversial Introduction to his *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* [Once upon a time]. Some critics believe it to be the manifesto for fiction in Iran (Mirabedini 514); others consider it as a manifesto for realistic prose (Payandeh 90). Jamalzadeh underlines the quintessence of realism and style in prose but fails to provide comprehensive and distinct definitions for his key terms including novel, story and anecdote and uses them interchangeably. In this introduction, Jamalzadeh attempts to refer to the social merits of novel. He follows his predecessors in insisting on the social benefits of novel. Jamalzadeh argues that "novels teach us many useful historical, scientific, philosophical and moral lessons by employing a pleasant language and charming style that invigorate their readers. In addition, novel can help different social segments learn about the lives of their fellows, about which they know little due to the disparities in their vocations and associations, and promote a more intimate understanding among them" (Jamalzadeh 8-9). While he pays a great deal of attention to the linguistic properties of fiction and discusses novel more coherently, Jamalzadeh does not feature a break in with his predecessors. Unlike Nafisi, he is fairly consistent with regard to his views over time. Though concerned with the techniques of creative writing, he always prioritizes the content. His works are mainly concerned with general major

social issues. That is why he prefers Roknzade Adamiat's *Daliran-e Tangestan* [Valiants of Tangestan] over commercial fiction or even translated works even despite its technical shortcomings (Jamalzadeh Roknzade Adamiat, Introduction 13-7). For the same reason he rejects modern literature and, even when he was not able to defeat it, he went so far as reconciliation rather than endorsement. For example, in an article entitled "a strange author and two bizarre books" that was published in 1332/1953 in *Sokhan* journal, he advises the young Iranian writers no to take James Joyce as their model in writing despite praising his vast knowledge (Jamalzadeh 108). Similarly, he openly opposes formalist and aesthetic movements in the forties and writes,

some distinguished writers and critics of fiction believe that art is an end in itself and does not need to perform any beneficial or utilitarian function. For them, the utmost benefit of stories is to delight the readers. They prioritize this spiritual pleasure over the other functions of fiction; this is why they are called Parnassians. Guy de Maupassant, one of the most famous novelists in France and even in the world, belongs to this category. They insist that the novelist must not pursue a moral purpose but should act merely as a storyteller and be interested in fiction for its own sake. I, on the contrary, believe that the author should also play the role of a physician, teacher and mentor. He/she should also be committed to improve the situation of people by revealing social truths and guiding his/her audience through employing an appropriate diction and style. He/she should be a leading iconoclast who provides enlightenment for his/her readers. (Jamalzadeh 47)

Jamalzadeh's criticism of Maupassant shows that he has opposed formalism for a long time. Therefore, his views on fiction have been fairly consistent since his early works on novel in 1300. He considered a social mission for fiction and insisted that it should pursue larger aims than merely rendering aesthetic pleasure. So he can be considered a Hegelian who represented engagé realism in fiction

Conclusion

Novelists and critics who wrote on novel between 1250-1300/1872-1922 believed that fiction should impart sublime meanings; that is to say, they have followed early realist novelists and critics in Europe. This attitude promoted realist fiction and engagé literature. With the advent of mid-twenties, that witnessed the growth of the communist Tudeh Party and leftist journals including *Payame Now* [The new message], novel was reduced to a mere political means to oppose capitalism. The inclination of the political sphere towards the left and the social situation determined theories of fiction in Iran; however, the transition from realism to modernism was mainly motivated by the realist theories of fiction and their opposition to modernism. Although engagé realism dominated the literary scene, this very movement also featured traces of formalism and modernism. For example, Ehsan Tabari, a prominent literary critic of the time, tended toward formalism despite his Marxist leanings (Parsinejad 67). This seeming contradiction reflects the formalist and modernist fissures in realism. Sadegh Hedayat, who wrote “Haji Agha” under the influence of the Tudeh Party (219) broke from the party and Tabari by penning “Kafka’s Message” that served as a pioneering manifesto of modernism in Iran. In this essay, he declares that Kafka has revealed deception and hypocrisy and had disillusioned its readers about the false Paradise (Hedayat 11). Moreover, in the early thirties, when socialism thrived, and forties, new journals emerged that completely contrasted previous theories in terms of their structure. *Khoroos Jangi* [gamecock] and *Jong-e Isfahan* [Anthology of Esfahan] are two significant examples of such journals. The contributors of *Khoroos Jangi* extol radical formalism;² and Abolhassan Najafi’s translations and Golshiri’s articles in *Jong-e Isfahan* championed an avant guard approach that relied on Kant.³ Kant’s theories of aesthetics prepared the ground for formalism in Europe and these theories found their way into Iran through translation.

²See *Khoroos Jangi*, Vol. 1, Issue 4, Page 9 to see how its aim was close to futurist and surrealist sympathies.

³See, for example, *Jong-e Isfahan*, Vol. 5, pp. 1-4 for a defense of modern novel which borders on a manifesto.

This paper reviewed the introduction of the notion of committed fiction in Iran. The pioneering novel criticism basically consists of a set of recommendations on the moral relevance and benefits of novel which can be achieved mainly through realism. The social circumstances and western influence led the pioneering critics of novel to tend toward engagé literature. With the advent of socialism, the ensuing socio-political situation was even riper for this kind of literature.

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