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Pre-Modern and Early Modern Persian Literature: Written while Travelling?

Claus V. Pedersen

Associate Prof. of Iranian Studies
University of Copenhagen, Denmark
clausp@hum.ku.dk

Abstract

In literary histories written in both Iran and the West it has generally be assumed that early modern Persian literary works are (technically inferior) copies of Western literary works. This has been and is still a claim. Almost no academically and scientifically sound works has substantiated this claim. While there is no point in denying a European influence on early modern Persian literature, there is a need of looking at earlier indigenous Persian literary works in order to see if there are other beginnings or influences on early modern Persian literature. This paper intends to show that Persian travelogues from the 19th century, and especially Hâj Sayyâh's *Safarnâme*, reflects a new world view which is a forerunner of the world view that can be found in early modern(ist) Persian literature, indicating that developments in 19th century literary works and intellectual history of Iran also has a role to play in influencing later literature, next to European literary influence. The paper is a description of some aspects of Hâj Sayyâh's *Safarnâme* compared to one of the earliest modern(ist) pieces of literature, Mohammad 'Ali Jamâlzâde's short story *Bile dig, bile choghondar*.

Keywords: Early modern Persian literature, Persian travelogues from the 19th Century, travellers' texts, cultural encounters, intellectual history and world view

...[A]l travel writing has a twofold aspect. It is most obviously, of course, a report on the wider world, an account of unfamiliar people or place. Yet it is also revelatory to a greater or lesser extent of the traveller who produced the report, and of his or her values preoccupations and assumptions.¹

It is generally agreed that Modern Persian literature began with Jamâlzâde's collection of short stories *Yeki bud-o yeki nabud* ("Once Upon a Time"), published abroad in Berlin in 1921. Three of the six stories in that collection² might also be labelled *modernist* literature, that is, in this author's understanding, these three stories are an expression of a modernist world view in which there is no metaphysically fixed world order, and in which the individual (*in casu* the male protagonist) is both the center of the universe and absolutely free and reliant of only his intellectual and rational faculties through which he can understand, interpret and create the surrounding reality, subjectively and relatively.

Usually European literature is seen as the model through which Persian modern and modernist literature--including Jamâlzâde's pioneering collection of short stories--has come into existence, and the earliest examples of this assumed imitation mentioned in many literary histories are works like Marâghe'i's *Siyâhatnâme-ye Ebrâhim Beg* (in three volumes, 1897, 1905, 1909), the Persian translation of James Morier's *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (1824/tr. into Persian 1905), and historical and moralist (romantic) novels from the very beginning of the 20th century.³ There is no point in denying the European influence on modern Persian literature, but it must also be mentioned that this influence might have been exaggerated, and it should be made perfectly clear that there until now has been no academic and scientific attempts to show the exact art and nature of the European influence on Persian literature.⁴ Be this as it may, I think other, indigenous, influences on and beginnings of modern Persian literature have been overlooked, and one of these is the body of Persian travelogues (*safarnâmehâ*) from the 19th century (roughly corresponding to the Iranian 12th century *hejri shamsi*). In these travelogues I find the first traces of the modern individual I detect in the first modernist Persian literature from the 20th century (described above in connection with

Jamâlzâde's short stories). This I hope to demonstrate in the following by looking at one of these travelogues.

One of the most interesting travelogues from 19th century Iran is that of Hâj Sayyâh, *Safarnâme-ye Hâj Sayyâh*, and below I will present some aspects of it. But first I will throw a very short glance at Kamran Rastegar's *Literary Modernity between the Middle East and Europe*.

In historical and sociological research on the Middle East in the late 19th and early 20th centuries nationalism and modernity, including literary modernism, have been considered twin-sisters and part and parcel of the massive Western ideological and literary influence on the emerging Middle Eastern nation states. Kamran Rastegar has in his *Literary Modernity between the Middle East and Europe—Textual transactions in nineteenth-century Arabic, English, and Persian literatures*, 2007 (p. 13ff.) questioned the interdependence of nationalism and modernist literature (especially the novel). He invites us to look at the emerging modernity from other perspectives, and I will present two of them briefly. Firstly Rastegar sees the emergence of a printing press independent of both royal and religious authority as both a pre-condition for and a logical outcome of an individual's quest for a way of expressing his or her own values and ideas (Rastegar, pp. 6-7). Next Rastegar introduces—in this new “autonomous field of literary production” (p. 7)—the term *literary transactions* (p. 6), “...texts engendered through and emergent from translation, appropriation and circulation of textual materials across cultural boundaries...” (ibid.). These texts, mainly from the 19th century, Rastegar considers instrumental in transforming the social function of literature, innovating literary practice and altering evaluation of literature (ibid.). The texts Rastegar presents and analyses are the translations of the *Arabian Nights—Alf layla wa layla*—into English, and Morier's *The Adventures of Hâji Bâbâ of Ispahan* into Persian, and Persian and Arabic travelogues (real and fictional). In this article I am not doing proper justice to Rastegar's skilled analyses of the texts mentioned above and his theoretical framework. I am inspired by the analyses but use them for my own purpose, which is to show that “literary transactions” or what I would call “travelling texts” and “texts written by travellers” give a further indication out of which modern and modernist Persian literature developed than merely

assuming that Western political ideology and literary modes were the sole determinant factors.

In the following I will give a brief description of some aspects of Hâj Sayyâh's *Safarnâme-ye Hâji Sayyâh* (published in translation as *An Iranian in 19th Century Europe: The Diaries of Haj Sayyah, 1859-1877*)⁵ and then return to one example of modernist prose literature of the early decades of 20th century Iran, a short story written by Mohammad 'Ali Jamâlzâde. Hâj Sayyâh's *Safarnâme-ye Hâji Sayyâh* is the story of Sayyâh's travels from 1859 and the next 10 to 15 years. It ends abruptly and the rest of the story can be gleaned from his other posthumous published travelogue/memoirs *Khâterât-e Hâj Sayyâh yâ Dowre-ye khowf va vahshat* (Tehran, 1967).

Hâj Sayyâh (1836-1924) was from a poor peasant family in the city of Mahallât, grew up in Tehran, and later, with the financial support of his uncle, he studied religion in Karbalâ and Najaf. In his 23rd year he was back in Iran again and it was decided that he should marry his cousin and stay in the village of Mohâjerân for the rest of his life (Sayyâh 1998, p. 15). This was a deplorable thought for Hâj Sayyâh, and out of thirst for knowledge of other places and things, as he says on the first page in the travelogue (Sayyâh 1998, p. 19⁶), he left the village secretly and set out for a journey that brought him to the most of Europe (and later also to the US) which makes him, I think, the first Iranian globetrotter. Back home in Iran Sayyâh was connected with contemporary Iranian reformers, and unfortunately for him also with Nâser od-Din Shâh's assassin, which earned him an external exile in Mashhad and later also imprisonment and torture. He died autumn 1925 in the wake of Rezâ Khân ascension to kingship.⁷

In the beginning of the travelogue Hâj Sayyâh presents himself implicitly as a wandering knowledge seeking dervish (explicitly so p. 30/p. 39), and he is also dressed as a Muslim cleric (p. 21/p. 28⁸), but after the first longer stay, in Tbilisi, where he learns Armenian, a dramatic change of his character takes place. After nearly starving to death, Sayyâh gets a job—because he now has learned Armenian—and he becomes a respected person in the city (pp. 38-52/pp. 48-65). In short, he becomes more a citizen in and of the world and less an ascetic with an abstract thirst for knowledge. This first breakthrough of a new

identity is described very emotionally, while Sayyâh is leaving Tbilisi and thinking of his time there and one of his benefactors (Âqâ Hambârsun):

My imagination went back to the first day I had arrived in Tbilisi, the sufferings I had endured, and the extreme kindness of Âqâ Hambârsûn. I was deep in my thoughts. *It was as if I were in another world.* Tears rolled down my cheeks. (p. 52 (my italics)/p. 65 (italics):

چنان حیران بودم که گویا از عالمی به عالمی رفته ام...

At first reading of this passage, the thankfulness expressed by Sayyâh could be attributed to his friend and benefactor Âqâ Hambârsun. And the movement from one world to another could be interpreted as the sufi's ascension from one mental station to another. But in the context of the situation in the travelogue, Sayyâh's emotional outburst and the words about how he has gone from one world to another strongly indicate, I think, that Sayyâh realises—as a kind of an epiphany—that he has developed as a person, has entered a new word and a new reality. Hâj Sayyâh continues his travels across Europe and manages to learn (some) Russian, French, English, and German in order to understand the people he meets, and in order to learn from the places he goes to.

From the travelogue it is evident that Hâj Sayyâh is especially interested in the organisational fabric of the societies he visits. Again and again--and probably exaggeratedly--he admires the order and the cleanliness of (mostly) European cities, the technological advancements, the good schools and hospitals, the human treatment of the poor and the criminals in prisons, the politeness and correct behaviour of policemen and soldiers. It would go too far to mention all the places that Sayyâh mentions as being well organised, beautiful, rich, clean, joyful, and--maybe most importantly--technologically advanced; but I will quote one passage from Sayyâh's first visit to Paris in the company of a fellow Muslim traveller, where he describes the city of cities:

Whatever I [Sayyâh] saw that night I had never seen elsewhere. All the city looked like jewelry. My companion said, "Can there be anything better than this?"

I said: ‘Man has the ability to perform whatever he can imagine. He will certainly continue improving things in the future.’¹⁰

On the streets the roads for carriages, the paths for animals, and the sidewalks for the pedestrians were separate. Police watched to ensure that all kept to their own places.

There were music and singing in coffee shops and theatres. They were all full, with no place to sit. It was not even possible to stand. We had to keep on moving. This way we went until we reached a very big square. The trees were festooned with green lights. Musicians played, and young people and children danced. They enjoyed complete freedom.... At one side the Seine River flowed. The ropes, smokestacks, and masts of the boats were illuminated. The reflection of all the lights in the water was so pretty that words cannot describe their beauty.

I said to my companion: ‘The benefit of *order* [my italics] is that a country has such progress.’

He said: ‘A lot has been written about paradise in our books; but I don’t believe paradise can be better than this.’

I answered: ‘Do not talk of religion, please. One can compare two places when he sees two of them. How can we judge now that we have not [*sic*]¹¹ seen paradise? When we were in Lyon and Marseilles we could not think of Paris being so much better; now that we see Paris we know it.’¹²

Sayyâh might be the first Iranian intellectual that combines “order”, (including “cleanliness”, see the page above) and “technology” and makes these identical with “progress”. Additionally he makes “(absolute) freedom”, i.e. a basic human right, another aspect of a good society. But Sayyâh is, I think, also many decades ahead of later Iranian thinkers in the fact that he makes “order” (نظم) the very foundation of “progress”. For Sayyâh it is order produced by rational—maybe even scientific—thought that leads to the rich and technologically advanced societies he meets on his way through Europe. For him “progress” is

not just given to people or societies by chance or through favourable conditions. People must understand the importance of and learn and acquire rational thought and *then* create a good, well ordered society.¹³ In the same vein, Sayyâh also rejects any talk of religion ('Do not talk of religion, please.')

—although he is a devout Muslim—and highlights what he believes is an earthly reality: Man is master of his own faith ('Man has the ability to perform whatever he can imagine.').

The quote above from Sayyâh's visit to Paris does not only position him as a believer in "order", "rational thought", and "man as master of his own faith", all aspects of a modernist world view as described on the first page of this paper. It also position Sayyâh as a believer in "ever changing reality" and "relative truth". The fact that he states that man "...will certainly continue improving things in the future" and that "When we were in Lyon and Marseilles we could not think of Paris being so much better; now that we see Paris we know it", clearly indicates that Sayyâh sees the world as an ever changing reality relative to time ('man will improve things in the future') and place (according to his remark on Lyon and Marseilles compared to Paris). In this quote and other places in his travelogue, I think, Sayyâh shows himself as a holder of modernist outlook nourished by all the experiences he makes while travelling. Critics of this interpretation of mine would surely object that Sayyâh's religious belief, a belief in a metaphysical world order, contradicts my interpretation. My answer to this would be that Sayyâh makes a distinction between the spiritual world, religion, God's realm, and the material world in which man and rational thought operates. This is also indicated in the quote above, as mentioned, where Sayyâh says "Do not talk of religion, please."¹⁴

Sayyâh's travelogue has the ambition of being an objective description of the people and things that the protagonist meets. There are, though, several places in the travelogue where the reader feels that it is an "edited" and very subjective version of what Sayyâh sees and experiences. One place where he meets conditions which he interprets as Ottoman despotism, he says:

What I say about the Ottoman regimes in fact does not concern a travel account. In a travel account the writer gives information about what he sees. Nevertheless, it seems inhuman to overlook such matters. The citizens of a country

are like the sheep that a shepherd should take care of, but the shepherd must not be the wolf himself.¹⁵

Sayyâh cannot--as this quote shows--help himself being subjective. One might also surmise that the travelogue is written up in episodes¹⁶ retrospectively on the basis of notes taken while travelling, which means that the text, then, would have been written much later. One could also surmise that at the time of writing the travel diaries, Sayyâh wanted to convey a general message to his readers, which again could have tempted the author to edit or fictionalise events on his travels to make his message clearer.¹⁷ Be it as it may, it is *also* possible to read Sayyâh's *Safarnâme* as a *Bildungsroman* in which the reader follows the personal development of young man maturing into adulthood. Sayyâh seems to know this, or realises this gradually, and halfway through the travelogue he tells the governor of Odessa: "My traveling, I hope, will make me a man."¹⁸

I will now turn to an early modern Persian short story written by Mohammad 'Ali Jamalzâde in order to demonstrate the likenesses in view on individuality, the rational faculties and interpretation, the relativity of truth and reality, in short the likenesses in world view between Jamalzâde's text and Hâj Sayyâh's text. The short story is "Bile dig, bile choghondar" ("What's Sauce for the Goose", from *Yeki bud-o yeki nabud*, 1921). It begins like this: "âdat-ham haqiqatan mesl-e gedâ-ye Sâmare va gorbe-ye khânegi va yahudi-ye talabkâr va kut-kesh-e (yâ be qowl-e tehrânihâ kennâs-e) esfahâni ast ke hezâr bâr az in dar birunesh koni az dar-e digar tu mi-âyard."

And in Moayyad and Sprachman's English translation: "Habit truly is like a beggar from Samaria or a pet cat or a Jew owed money or an Isfahani jakesraker (or 'dustman' as they say in Tehran): no matter how many times you throw it out one door, it'll always return through another"¹⁹

This story is about habit, as indicated, but not ordinary habit. It is about the kind of habit that blinds people²⁰ and does not allow people to see the world as it is. The story is told by an exiled Iranian, like Jamâlzâde who was travelling and living outside Iran when he wrote his famous first collection of short stories. The narrator meets a French masseur who has been to Iran with his former master, a diplomat and invited advisor to Iran. From the story that

the masseur tells about Iran, a satirical, ridiculing and exaggerated story, the narrator all of a sudden comes to realise that Iran is not what he remembered it to be and that his own understanding of Iran has been clouded by ill memory and habit. But he also realises that the European masseur's understanding of Iran is limited and partly wrong, and thus the short story ends with a kind of catharsis for the narrator: At first he feels humiliated by the fact that he does not understand his own country and what he comes from, but after gaining that understanding he feels relieved--and extra so as he realises that he understands European society (and now also Iranian society) much better than the masseur understands Iranian society.

In Jamalzâde's short story we meet--like in Sayyâh's travelogue--an interpreting individual and a world that is naturally subject to interpretation. "Reality" is interpretable and appears changeable depending on the person observing it, and the time and place from where it is seen. There is some disillusion and disappointment on the part of the narrator in Jamalzâde's short story directed against the conditions in Iran,²¹ but there is also a joyful realisation of the fact that man can move towards a growing awareness of the world, and that things and conditions can change and be changed by and individual that knows. Just like in the quote from Sayyâh's visit in Paris above.

There is of course no direct link between Sayyâh travelogue and Jamalzâde's short story. But there is a likeness in what concerns way of thinking, view of the individual, and world view. What strikes this author, too, is that both authors were travellers, and that both texts are about travellers and travelling.²² It seems to me that travelling, travelogues, and travelling texts (Jamalzâde's *Yeki bud-o yeki nabud* travelled from Berlin to Iran the year of its publishing) have *contributed* to a new way of thinking, a modernist way of thinking, that paved the way for a new world view and a new literature in the early decades of 20th century Iran.

Notes:

1. Thomson, Carl, *Travel Writing*, Routledge, London, 2011, p. 10 in the chapter “Defining the Genre”.
2. See my *World View in Pre-Revolutionary Iran: Literary Analysis of Five Iranian Authors in the Context of the History of Ideas*, Mizân, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2002, pp. 7-52 for an analysis of Jamâlzâde’s stories in *Yeki bud-o yeki nabud* (three of them) as modernist short stories (German *Novellen*). See also the brief analysis of one of the three at the end of this paper.
3. For examples of this see for instance Hassan Kamshad’s *Modern Persian Prose Literature* 1996, pp. 17-30 and pp. 41-84, in which the historical and moralist, romantic novels, which at times are seen as European (mostly French) novels transported into a Persian setting, are works by authors like Mohammad Bâqer Khosrovi and Sheykh Musâ Nasri, San’atizâde Kermâni (historical novels) and Moshfeq Kâzemi, ‘Abbâs Khalili, Mohammad Hejâzi (moralist, romantic novels).
4. See Khorrâmi’s *Modern Reflections of Classical Traditions in Persian Fiction*, 2003, p. 5ff., for a precise analysis of the lack of academic evidence of European influence on (early) Persian literature. It should be mentioned, though, that a pioneering analysis of the influence of European poetry on early modern Persian poetry (Nimâ and other poets) can be found in Amr Taher Ahmed’s excellent PhD thesis, *La “Révolution Littéraire”*, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Vienna, 2012.
5. I will in the following quote from the English translation of Hâj Sayyâh’s travelogue, *An Iranian in 19th Century Europe: The Diaries of Haj Sayyah, 1859-1877*, tr. Mehrbanoo Nasser Deyhim, Introduction by Peter Avery, Bethesda, MD, 1998, but also give the references to the Persian original text *Safarnâma-ye Hâj Sayyâh*, ed. ‘Ali Dehbâshi, Tehran, 1984. Thus in the following references p. X/p. Y, X refers to the English translation of the travelogue translated by Deyhim, and Y refers to the original Persian text edited by Dehbâshi.
6. Here is the quote from the first page of the travelogue: “If the marriage took place, then I would spend all my life in the same locale and I would not learn anything about the world.” (p. 19/p. 25)
7. For further information see Ali Ferdowsi’s excellent account of Sayyâh’s life and work in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Hâj Sayyâh, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hajj-sayyah>
8. The Persian original text has اهل علم “people of learning/knowledge” which roughly means ‘Muslim clerics’.
9. My italics are from Deyhim’s translation of a part of a sentence in the original that could be translated differently, thus: “I was so bewildered as if I had gone from one world to another...” This translation would even more, I think, support my interpretation that Sayyâh at this stage of his travels is undergoing a change of character or identity.
10. The Persian text has here: تا اکنون بدین درجه رسیده باز هم عوالم انسانیت و ترقی درجات دارد, which in a more precise translation would be something like this: “as he [man] has now reached this level [of civilization] he has in him further levels (of worlds of) humanity and progress.”
11. Here I would suggest the original text should be translated: “Now we have seen this, how can one say that there would not be something better than this...”, the original being ... ندیده بهتر است... Dehbâshi, pp. 158-159.
12. P. 126/pp. 158-59

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