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Relationship between History and Literature in Historical Texts

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Abstract

The relation between history and literature is very important especially in Iran where historical texts in terms of their writing styles are included in literary work category. Looking at Iranian classic literature chiefly the texts from 11th to 18th century, we can conclude that modern historiography was not common in Iran leading us to guess that in fact court writers were in charge of writing Iran's history with a very difficult language. Therefore, reading these historical books for research can face us with many difficulties. Some of these historical texts are special books for Ph.D. course in Persian literature and language because of their very difficult language and literary style that is named artificial style. Understanding these requires extensive knowledge in words and literary devices. Historians use the narrative method to explain events thus the structure of historical texts is closed to story style. On The other hand, it is not possible to understand and analyze literary works without a historical understanding of the period in which they were written. This study tries to analyze the relation between historical and literary books and problems in understanding them. In addition, we suggest some solution for researches in these two fields (History and Literature).

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1. Introduction

Literature and history have a long lasting and ancient relationship in Iranian culture. The penetration of literary language in historical texts and the influence of historical knowledge on a deeper understanding of literary texts have not been hidden for many of the researchers of humanities. Understanding and analyzing the literature of any era requires the knowledge of the historical context which has been the main cause for the creation of such literary work. Besides, when these literary works, with some historical content are also placed within the class of historical works and used as sources by researchers in the field of history, they gain twice as much importance. Inferencing historical facts from literary texts full of lexical mysteries and difficulties may cause historical research to encounter specific adversity. This paper intends to introduce suggestions to reach firm historical studies through the investigation of the problems which may ensue through providing and analyzing samples of historical-literary texts.

For this study, three books were chosen. These books have been of most significant and distinctive literary and of course historical masterpieces of their era. Considering the dates they were written (4th to 7th centuries AH) and by analyzing them, we could study the historical texts and their literary language in order to deal with the paper's goal and the historical pathology. According to Rastegar Fasaee (1380/2001), "*Tarikhnama* [Bal'ami's History] is not only one of the most ancient examples of historiography in Iran, but is also one of the oldest available Persian prose" (400). *Tārīkh-i Bayhaqī* [Bayhaqī's History] in 5th century AH is one of the main sources for history scholars, as it includes a very precise history of the Ghaznavid Empire. Its style is also indeed a special example of poetic and artistic writing, technical and simple prose (Morsal and technical) which is rather unique in its kind. Because of its particular prose and that it belongs to the intermediary period based on stylistics, *Tārīkh-i Bayhaqī* has attracted much attention from literary scholars as well. *Tārīkh-i Jahāngushāy*

[The History of The World Conqueror] belongs to the 7th century AH marking the beginning of a new stylistic writing, i.e., technical prose. The literariness of the prose is so rich that although it is dealing with a historical subject matter, “it is as if historians are hidden behind the technical writer or the man of letters, so that history has been changed into a technical prose” (Rastegar Fasaee, 1380/2001, 378-379). Interestingly enough, all these three historians have been men of letters (Dabir) of their own era.

Due to their significance, these three books have not only attracted the attention of Iranian scholars, but also orientalist and Iranologists like Theodor Nöldeke, Arthur Christensen, Jan Rypka, and others. Thereby, considering the above explanations, I have analyzed these three books.

2. Literary Expression and Historical Expression

Language is the means of communication amongst human beings and history is a witness that vocabulary is the eternal legacy of mortal human beings. For centuries, words have passed deeply in hearts from one writer to another; each line of the inscriptions and manuscripts has provided an opportunity for today’s people to flash back to thousands of years ago and read the customs and thoughts of ancient people just with opening a page of a book. The word in myth becomes the secret of Gilgamesh’s eternity- Gilgamesh is a character in Mesopotamia who was seeking eternity--that is when mythological history is linked to history.

According to Babak Ahmadi (1381/2002), one of Heidegger's most famous sayings is, “Language is the home of universe”; he assumed that only when a man utters a word he would be able to think, hence logical reasoning would not come to existence through other means proven and accepted by Metaphysics (708-9). When language steps into the realm of literature, each word takes shape as a world of image, music, and a variety of meanings, even becoming

antithetical and literary speech comes into being. In a place where the real meaning of the speaker's mind hides in the labyrinth of colors and sounds, the virtual language becomes the safest way for people to express their inner feelings; in fact what is said differs from what is meant. Poems, stories and fables enter the humans' world and help them say the unspoken and shout in silence. Poetry helps humans cross geographical borders, and interrelationship of thoughts in the world of literature makes it possible for people to reach their eternal unity and connect their emotions and thoughts.

On the other hand, these words themselves are the best means of conveying the news, events, and annual and daily historical calendars. The history of the people of each land has, more than anything, been stated through historical texts. Along with honest, transparent and univocal concepts of words as a prerequisite of historical language, polysemy and enclosed true concepts are other necessities of literary language. As long as the historical language and the literary language are used each in its proper place, researchers can simply and confidently rely on their target texts to reach a specific purpose, but in the history and literature of Iran, an inseparable interrelation existing between the historical and literary texts, especially until the Qajar era, makes us to face special difficulties in research.

It is quite evident that in ancient times, a cavalcade of historical books were written by the court's writers and scribes, due to the kings' special attention to these writers and poets; complexity and pedantry in their writing styles are noticeable features of those times' historians including books such as, *Tarikh-i Bayhaqi*, *Tarikh-i Jahangushay*, and *Tarikh-i Vassaf*. Employing literary language in historical texts is to the extent that some of the historical books are taught as literary texts with the purpose of acquaintance with special vocabulary and methodology of the period while the same books are taught in the history classes to the students of history at university with the purpose of understanding the historical facts about the Qaznavid or Mongol eras.

Today, understanding language and linguistics is undergoing a remarkable evolution to the extent that from the viewpoint of contemporary linguistics

understanding a language has an inseparable interrelation with fields such as psychology, mythology, sociology, and, of course, history. The appearance of scientific branches such as linguistic sociology and linguistic psychology are the result of this thinking style and dealing with the world of language and literature.

Nowadays, understanding the literary expression of a text, even a completely literary text, necessitates knowledge of the historical background of the text's lexis and the history of the creation of the text, to the extent that Hawks (2018) believes,

'Metaphor' only exists because metaphors do. And metaphors only exist when they actually occur in language, in society, and in time. None of these elements is a constant factor. In other words, the notion of metaphor itself is shaped at any given time by linguistic and social pressures, as well as by its own history: it has no pristine form. (5).

Although what was mentioned implies the tie between literary comprehension and historical deduction, this question always poses itself that in mere historical studies where the researcher or the historian is solely searching for an understanding of a specific event or period of time, how can the truth be found from texts such as *Tarikh-i Vassaf*, which is filled with similes, metaphors, Arabic phrases, verses, proverbs and poems, especially in situation such as the seventh century in which the court's scribe is also a historian and, of course, writes that history with the direct order of the king; Obviously, he had to state the facts covered in such a way not to be subject to the king's wrath. Regardless of this fact, the historian's amount of information with regard to the literary language of such wordings has a direct effect on comprehending historical-literary texts.

The point is that in some cases the passage or poems which themselves do not pretend to be stating history with the passage of time and due to stating some historical facts or some specific periods' social and political thoughts and some

historical clauses-- in poetical contexts, the poet sometimes implies the date of birth or occurrence of events- are classified into historical texts and practical books for the researchers of history. Such texts include the poems and books of the poets and writers of constitutional era and afterwards.

With the development of historical thinking and people's tendency towards analysis and participation in the society's historical and political events, some of the historical events or their consequences found a way into folk literature in a way that some proverbs indicate people's social reaction against their time's historical issues. Although, on the one hand, the connection between literary and historical expression has led to productivity, multi-meaningfulness and mysteriousness of historical-literary texts in the Iranian culture, it has paved the way for the emergence of unreal, exaggerated and even superstitious and mythical concepts in the structure of historical books. It is especially noticeable in books, which are classified as general history books. For a better understanding of the above-mentioned concepts, some examples of historical literary books will be presented.

3. Analysis of Historical Texts

3.1 Tarikh-i Bal'ami

This book was compiled by Abu Ali Bal'ami Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Abdullah Bal'ami, the well-known minister of Amir Mansour ibn Noah Samani, based on the translation of Tarikhe Tabari. Since he reported information from other books in it, they named it *Tarikh-i Bal'ami* (Safa, 1368, 144). Bal'ami states at the beginning of his book, "behold that this is a great history book that is gathered by Abi Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarir Yazid Al Tabari, peace be upon him, ordered by the commander of Khurasan Abu Saleh Mansour ibn Noah that was later translated in the nicest and most accurate manner by Abu Ali Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn al-Bala'mi." (Bal'ami, 1368: 21); then he states the reasons of his attention to Tarikh e Tabari as follows:

When I looked at it and found numerous sciences as well as evidences, Quranic verses, nice poems and many other gains, I struggled much and tried so hard and translated it into Persian with assistance from the Almighty and compassionate God. And we, with the help of God the great, wanted to mention the history of the world stated by everybody including astrologists and historians from any religious s such as fire worshipers, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, whatever they said. (Bal'ami, 22)

As implied from the words of the translator and, in a sense, the writer of *Tarikh-i Bal'ami*, he is attracted to the artistic language of this text, in the first place, and he himself tries to make use of the literary language of his own time in the translation of the text. Another point which is worth mentioning in *Tarikh-i Bal'ami* is a blend of myths and sometimes superstitions with historical stories.

3.2 Tarikh-i Bayhaqi

Safa (1368) introduces Bayhaqi and gives details as follows, Khajeh Abul Fazl Muhammad ibn Hossein Bayhaqi, the famous knowledgeable author of the Qaznavid court, had a book describing the history of Al-e Saboktakin from the beginning of this family's decree until the beginning of the rule of Sultan Ibrahim Ibn Mas'ud, from which a part is available now and is known as *Tarikh-i Bayhaqi*. . . . Abulfazl Bayhaqi, after gaining virtues, entered the Mahmudi Divan Rasayel and worked at the service of Khajeh Bu Nasre Meshkan. For some time, he was the owner of "Divan e Ensha-- a division of the court which was in charge of writing official letters and the king's orders. (Safa, vol. 1, 337)

Tarikh-i Bayhaqi is of a great importance with the researchers and students of history with regards to the political events reports of the Qaznavid era as well as that of the writer's method of writing and the accuracy of its information and Bayhaqi's precision in stating the events and using the documents provided for him by the court. Regarding the correctness of his words, Bayhaqi says, "... yet

have to utter the truth and I know that the wise and the experienced ones reading this would realize with this manuscript made me a slave to it and I would be able to handle it”(Bayhaqi, 80). In addition, with regards to the method of collecting the information that exists in *Tarikh-i Bayhaqi*, he admits,

And this reports, so fully as I am stating it, is due to the fact that I was trusted at the time, and no other person had knowledge of them except for my master Bu Nasr, peace be upon him, who reported them and refereed me in short letters of praise-- Maltafe (ملطفه) and I wrote subtle points and the letters of the surrounding kings and the Caliph, May he live long, and the heads of Turkestan, and whatever was important in the court, as long as Bu Nasr was alive; this is not boasting and is not a Bārnāmehⁱ that I am making but is an excuse that I am making due to this history lest the reader suppose that I am creating this from my own. (Bayhaqi, Preface)

On the other hand, this historical work is of special importance and high reputation to Persian researchers due to Bayhaqi's special writing style which is one of the best in the fifth century. He uses special words, accurate descriptions, allegory, Persian and Arabic poems, and refers to names and poems of writers contemporary with Abolfazl Bayhaqi.

The point is that while explaining historical events, sometimes Bayhaqi speaks so poetically that some parts of this history book looks like a literary text. However, he was always concerned about prolixity and while writing Hasanak-i Vazir anecdote refers to the story of Harun al-Rashid and Ja'far Barmaki stating clearly: "... Harun al-Rashid gave the command to kill Ja'far, the son of Yahya Barmak and tear him to shreds hung by gallows of four crosspieces; this story is very famous and I did not tell it to avoid prolixity and tiring out the readers and they would forget the history” (144).

Yet there is no doubt in Bayhaqi's tendency to write in a literary style. Describing Mehregan celebration in Sultan Mas'ud's court--it was the biggest Iranian festival after Nowruz which was held on a day called Mehr in October, he refers to meeting Master Abu Hanifeh Eskafi and finds it essential to add some

poems to the historical passage, "...in these days when I wrote this much of the history I happened to meet master Abu Hanifeh Eskafi and I had heard of his great virtue, politeness and knowledge but when I met him I found it better in meaning to write this verse of Mutanabbi, *و استكبر الأخبار قبل لقاى / فلما التقينا صغر*, "الخبر الخبير" (156). He implies that words are not enough to describe his greatness.

Bayhaqi then continues with his description, While talking I told him: "though you weren't present at the time of the previous kings, so that they would see your poems, you wouldn't have had less connection and reputation than the others; now I should say a poem to refresh the past and history could be adorned with it. He said the poem... and when I tell a long section on the praise of his majesty, Ghazni, at the beginning, I consider it my duty to name those graceful men who are from this city, especially someone like Bu Hanife, whose least grace is poetry and destitute of money or reputation and who teaches people knowledge for free. And hereafter, I would trust his grace to get whatever poems that history deserves and I will need" (Bayhaqi, 156)

It is worth noticing that the text of *Tarikh-i Bayhaqi*, in many cases, due to being intertwined with literature, Persian and Arabic proverbs and special vocabulary of the fifth century of Hijra, is rather difficult to read; in order to understand it better and deduce the historical events, which are expressed by prolixity and coated by poetic descriptions, literary understanding and knowledge of the literature of that era is required.

3.3 *Tarikh-i Jahangushay*

Safa (1368/1989) in volume two of *A History of Iranian Literature* praises this book and states that the owner of the book, 'Ala'edin Abul Mozaffar 'Atamalek Juvayni, is one of the greatest Iranian historians and writers in the seventh century AH. His most significant work is *Tarikh-i Jahangushay* and includes three books on the description of the appearance of Genghiz and his

conquests, the history of the Khwarazmshahian, the Mongol rulers of Iran, the conquest of the castles of the Ismailiyah and the successors of Hassan Sabbah. His prose in this book follows the styles of letter writers. He makes use of verses and narrations and employing Arabic and Persian poems in such a way that makes this book not only a valid history book in Persian but also an outstanding book in Persian literature.

As mentioned before, *Tarikh-i Jahangushay* is one of the texts, which, due to its writing style, has always been considered important and is used as a university text in the departments of Persian Literature, while its historical value among the historians is undeniable. The interconnection between the literary language and historical issues in this book may lead to some difficulty for researchers who are not well-versed in literary language. The following is a sample of such difficult language:

"... و از اندرون و بیرون جنگ را محتشد گشتند و تنگ مکاوحت و مخاصمت تا نماز شام محکم برکشیدند و از گشاد منجیق و کمان، تیر و سنگ پران شد... چون فیول قبول جراحت ها کرد و بحسب پیاده شطرنجی هیچ کفایت ننمود باز گشتند"¹¹

(Juveyni, 1366:" 62).

4. Pathology of Historical-literary Texts

In light of what has been mentioned, it is necessary to think about the concept of the pathology of historical research from this viewpoint, because the interconnection between literature and history and the effect of literary elements on the identity of historical texts makes it difficult to understand the truth of history. *Tazkares* (Reminders)--biographical books written about the poets, mystics and the court-- also mostly written by poets and literati, are considered another part of difficult sources in historical research.

4.1 The Influence of Gnosticism on Literary-historical Texts

Gnosticism is one of the most important and prominent concepts in the Iranian thoughts and literature. Especially from the sixth to the ninth century,

mysticism was the most dominant way of thinking in the Iranian literature, to the extent that some of the historical dynasties, such as the Safavids, or some of the historical revolts such as Sarbedaran (the name of a movement by Shiites against injustice caused by Mongolian rulers in Bashtin and Sabzevar) were directly connected to Gnostics and Sufis. In some eras, too, the heads of Gnostics and Sufis had a direct influence on the kings' and rulers' decisions. Therefore, traces of some historical facts in rather long periods of history can be sought in Gnostic literature and original Gnostic *Tazkares*.

It is a well-known that the language of Gnosticism is a language of hints and mystery. Gnostic texts have a multi-layer and multi-meaning structure and, due to their spiritual attitudes, have always been accompanied by some fictional stories on the greatness of the Gnostics among the public and also the writers. Hence, in texts like the *Tazkare* and *kitab al-Rijal*, books on social and political biography, even the historical books where literary structure is under the influence of the Gnostic language of that specific era, especially in the seventh and eighth century, it's difficult to understand these types of texts because inferring the "historical truth" and knowing "the real, historical identity" of the people lead to ambiguity and hesitation.

4.2 Historical Narrative or the Truth of History?

Although narratives have a literary foundation, and in most cases, the narrative finds meaning in the structure of the story, the classical method of stating history is also dependent on the structure of narrative, because a narrative speaks about what happened in the past in history, which can show historical facts or narrative imaginations. Shahba (1382) in his translation of Martin's *Recent Theories of Narrative* writes, "The beginning events of each narrative find meaning only through the following events and are considered causes. Many of sciences refer to the future but a narrative refers to the past and we can identify

the beginning point of a narrative through attention to its end ...” (50). Although the origins of historical reports and narratives seem to be quite different, understanding historical reports and narratives is accompanied with a sort of ancient connection. In France, the followers of “the school of history” believed that narrative history is nothing but solo enumeration of the cultural and political revolutions from the viewpoint of diverse schools. This type of criticism forced historical philosophers to review the underlying hypotheses of historical narratives. (48)

With this attitude, historical narratives can be considered to include news that have reached us from the past and in which the viewpoint of the historian has a special role in how the story begins and how and in what order the historical events are stated. However, this question always poses itself that whether the historical narrative has reported the truth of history. This question is more dominant in literary-historical texts and has a direct influence on the amount of accuracy in historical studies.

How to recognize this issue, especially when the writer has written it in a literary text with a great amount of delicacy in verse or prose, is very important. A literary narrative may have parts of truth, story, or imagination and even illusion. In historical education, diagnosing and separating history from narratives and literature is of special importance. Reference to the original source through a comparison among several texts renders us closer to the truth. The historical fact must be in agreement with the time and place of its occurrence in order to get close to the truth. Knowing the time and place from among a pile of literary words and literary devices requires special knowledge. Undoubtedly, having a historical viewpoint and the ability to read a text and understand its literary structure in order to separate the truths of history from the labyrinth of expressive techniques and narratives is necessary.

5. Suggestions for a Better Understanding of Historical Facts

The most fundamental duty of the historians is, undoubtedly, diagnosing and proving the truth and falseness of the news that they receive from the people in the past. Using any document that aids and guides the researcher in this diagnosis is necessary, especially the written documents which have a special importance. On the other hand, if we research the historians we find them in various occupations such as bureaucrats, tourists, ministers, and literati. Therefore, one of the most important duties of the historians is to prove the truth from among these narratives.

The first step is to separate the literary figures of speech, allusions and the subtleties that are the prerequisites of a literary text, and which are sometimes considered as superfluities in historical research. A historical researcher must have the ability to refine texts; therefore, education on how to read literary texts and especially to recognize corrected texts is one of these necessities.

In the first step, historical inference from a literary text is very important; therefore, the historical researcher should have a precise understanding of the period the book was written because there are undoubtedly important differences between a literary text that was written in a historical dynasty and one that was written two decades later about the same dynasty.

Attention to the period of writing a text draws the historian's attention to the dominant political conditions in that era. Ruling a society leaves its first effects on the writing structure and literature. For instance, we can note the abundance of historical books at the time of the Mongols, which were due to the Ilkhans' interest in history. In addition, the national religious literature of the Safavids which prioritized the praise of the Shia Imams over the praise of the king, shows a marked change in the style of writing books.

The second step after the first is attention to the place of writing literary books. Literary poetry or prose, besides the date they were written in, is also imperative

from the aspect of social position their writer possessed. Being present in the court entailed some kind of conservatism. Praising the kings and ministers, the manner of expressing justice or injustice, the kings' manner of meeting the public or seeking privacy separated the work of a royal writer from the work of a nationalist author or poet. One of the most important duties of a historian is to recognize whether the text was written for the money the poets were given by the kings for their poems or for the truth.

The third step in this sequence is religion. We know that Iran, after Islam, has an increasing number of religious sects. The division of the Shia into the followers of having four Imams, seven Imams, twelve Imams, and the smaller subdivisions in each tendency, and also the various branches of the Sunni cult has certainly made the work of literati of each field different from the others' and religious attitudes have undoubtedly had a direct influence on their writing styles. Therefore, a history student must learn which man of letter with what religious attitude has written his or her literary work of interest.

6. Conclusion

In line of what has been stated in the present article it could be understood that as a result of the tie between literature and history, the learners of these two subjects should receive an amount of this bond. To that end, workshops on understanding literary texts could be suggested to the students of history since the more the historical researcher is capable of understanding literary texts, the better he can reach the truth. On the other hand, a true understanding of historical attitude can help researchers to recognize the viewpoint of the historian and the literary men and to differentiate between narratives and historical reports. Additionally, presenting joined research studies conducted by the scholars of the fields of history and literature together can provide a great help in the clarification of the history of our land.

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ⁱ On the one hand, bārnāmeḥ means a letter by which people could obtain permission to enter the king's court and, on the other hand, it means a written permission for carrying or exporting goods.

ⁱⁱ This part is from *Tarikh-i Jahangushay*, one of the historical books of the 7th century. Due to the artificial and extremely difficult prose applied in this text and also the use of Arabic vocabulary and old Persian verbs, this part was not translated to English since throughout translation, the difficulties and literary devices and expressions of the text would be overlooked.