

Classics in Persia

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The first question one would ask is what is a classic? Obviously the general sense of the term, as in classic automobiles, is not intended here but only the literary remains of a culture. Secondly, the fad or the mode of the day cannot be deemed a classic until it has stood the test of time. Therefore when we consider classics in the Iranian world, which in the past included Central Asia and much of India, those writings which have been copied and recopied, and are considered classics by educated native Persian speakers, should constitute the body of classics in that part of the world. Since many non-Persian speakers have contributed to the diffusion of information about such classics, either by translations of them, or by studies about them, their opinions also should not be neglected in any discussion of Persian classics.

In the West when one mentions the Classics, at once one thinks of the Greek and Latin authors, but Shakespeare's writings are certainly classics, classics of the English language. Yet when one asks why study the Classics in European and American schools, it is the ancient writings which are meant. To put this into the Iranian context, writings in the Middle Persian, Avestan and Old Persian languages would be a parallel. When we search the world for other parallels to the Greek and Latin Classics, we find the same feeling of respect for what has been transmitted to posterity by the ancient sages of China, India and elsewhere.

In March 1995 in Tehran I was interviewed on local television to give my opinion about the importance of Iranian culture in the contemporary world. Since the question could not be answered in a few minutes, I decided to give a few general remarks, saying that in all lands the literature of the past had been preserved and copied and recopied because it was of value to succeeding generations and helped to answer eternal problems. Furthermore, the customs and practices of our ancestors are the heritage on which we base our further development of them, refining or changing them. What else do we have on which to construct our lives or to view the world? If a society felt a need to move in the direction of Singapore or in the opposite path to Miami vice, then in a sense it was making a decision about the heritage of its past. We hope and I

expect that the best of the past has been selected and has survived, because we assume it was the best that the past had to offer the future. In Tehran the question had been asked because of growing criticism of conservative policies of the government in power, and a consequent feeling of need for a great change in direction by the society.

My next suggestion at the interview was to heed the stories or maxims handed down in literature, which one should think about or even emulate, and ended with a brief popular Persian tale. A story is told about a king who on one of his rides saw an old man planting a walnut tree. He sent an aide to ask the old man why he was so foolish to plant a tree which would not bear nuts in his lifetime. The old man replied that he had eaten nuts from trees generations before had planted and he was now doing the same for posterity, whereupon the king rewarded him. This story, of course, is not intended to be a classic of Iranian culture, but at least it raises questions of what and why such items are preserved? It seems to me that a literary classic to endure must exhibit at least two features, that it be a great and interesting story or tale, and that it have some meaning or moral in that classic. Certainly many fascinating stories have been written, and many guides to conduct, or religious admonitions, have survived. But a true classic should combine both, in being a great story as well as a lesson worth remembering down the ages. In my opinion this is what one should expect in a classic of the Persian language. For Persian literature is not just the creation of inhabitants of the country we know today as Iran. Rather it is a vehicle of expression of many whose language was Persian throughout history, and even today it is the tongue of many who live in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. In that sense it is a truly classic literature.

Classics in the Persian language invariably have taken the form of poetry. Of all the poetry of the world none can surpass the glory of Persian poetry. The enormous production of many genres of poetry in the Persian language is testimony to the genius of Persian culture. The *carpe diem* Omar Khayyam has intrigued the West, but he is considered a minor poet by the Persians, while the mystical verses of Rumi and Attar, the sublime music of Hafez and the aphorisms of Sa'di, to name a few of the classic poets of Persian literature, overwhelm the listener with the beauty of their words as well as the messages they convey.

For in the Iranian world poetry is meant to be recited or sung, as well as composed, in countless informal gatherings, rather than written for, and studied by, only those who are specialists in literature. It is truly the vehicle of expression of all the people, rich and poor alike, and I have heard poetry composed by truck drivers on high passes of the Hindukush mountains, and by camel drivers in the salt desert of central Iran. Poetry, of course, loses much in translation, especially from Persian into an European language, for the sounds which are important for Persian poetry are difficult to convey. But meaning also

has a role to play and the aphorisms from Sa'di's *Gulistan* and *Bustan*, since they are read in schools in Iran, reflect the values of society, and are valuable for understanding the Iranians today. For example, we may not approve of Sa'di's saying "a little white lie which causes pleasure is better than the truth which causes pain", but most Persians would agree with him. This is not to characterize all of Persian poetry in this light, as composed of maxims, for the range of subjects and the melodies of the words are innumerable. It is impossible here to list or discuss them.

But there is a great difference between the Greek and Latin Classics and those of Iran, since in the latter case those which have been preserved and copied again and again were primarily religious texts. We must remember that ancient religious writings are paeonic and meant to be heard more than understood, which makes one wonder whether all classics must exhibit only, or primarily, the feature of understanding on the part of audiences. Audiences, of course, originally were those who heard rather than saw or read. Naturally one could claim the Bible, Quran and other religious texts as classics, but only in China do we find time-honoured non-religious literature comparable to the Greco-Roman world. Elsewhere in the ancient Orient, especially in India, religion dominated the life of people over centuries. In Iran priests not only were most influential in the lives of people, but they were teachers who, it seems, almost monopolized literacy before the coming of Islam. The Muslim conquests brought the Arabic language wherever they extended, and Arabic spread as a counterpart to Greek and Latin, while the ancient Iranian tongues of Pahlavi, Sogdian and Khwarazmian vanished, except for Pahlavi which remained a sacred tongue for the Zoroastrians, who, however, spoke New Persian in their daily lives.

It is difficult to believe that the remarkable flowering of New Persian poetry had no roots in the pre-Islamic past, and only grew under the impetus of Islam and the Arabic language. The answer, is not difficult to find, for pre-Islamic poetry surely existed, but the canons of measured Arabic poetry, inherited from ancient Greek poetry, set the norms for acceptable poetry composed anywhere in the Islamic world. So old themes and ancient stories were reset in the genres of formal New Persian poetry based on syllabic length of words. Then Persian poetry surpassed the parallel creations of the Arabs and Turks in their tongues.

In late Medieval Europe it was a common saying that *dominium* was the province of the Germans, *sacerdotium* of the Italians, and *magisterium* of the French, while in the Near East, as the historian and sociologist Ibn Khaldun reported, *daulah* (government) belonged to the Turks, *din* (religion) to the Arabs, and *adab* (culture) to the Persians, in exact parallel to the European notion. This put the Iranians in a position similar to the French. Practically speaking, perhaps a world classic is one which has been translated into various

languages and is recognized as a classic everywhere. Shakespeare's works certainly qualify and so do many of the creations of Persian poets, even though, as mentioned, poetry is everywhere difficult to translate into languages other than the original. Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat has been translated into many tongues and may be called a classic since the Persians do not ignore him; rather they assert that Hafez, Rumi and Sa'di express sentiments similar to Khayyam's but in a more inspiring and beautiful language. It should be noted, however, that in Iran the classics of the Persian language had an effect which many have deemed injurious or downright baneful. Models were set such that, similar to Persian miniature painting, only attempts to copy the masters were considered acceptable, and thus creativity was stifled. Granted that the *Shahnameh* or Book of Kings, is a remarkable epic of the Iranian people, but when many later books took both the style and contents of the original masterpiece as a model from which deviations were not allowed, or at least they would be ridiculed if they did so, then creativity or innovation suffered greatly. The same may be said of the lyrics of Hafez and the mystical poetry of Rumi. In other words classics in Iran can be stifling as well as uplifting.

Consequently we return to the question whether the message primarily determines what is a classic, which generally appears to be true in Western writings. Or does the form, and even the sounds, of a classic insure its place in the hearts as well as the minds of Orientals? Perhaps we are talking only of the difference between prose and poetry, or is it more complicated? I must confess to an inability to find a real classic in the Persian language other than in poetry, and perhaps this is the main distinction between classics in the West and in Iran. I do not wish to extend these remarks to other literatures and other peoples in the Orient, but rather confine myself to the New Persian language which arose in eastern Iran (Khurasan) or Central Asia in the tenth and eleventh centuries of our era. But that is another story which has been told elsewhere by myself and others.

Why is the *Shahnameh* of Firdosi considered the first classic of the Persian language, even though its poetry is hardly equivalent to the later works of Hafez and others? It could be compared to the Iliad and Odyssey but even more, it is the ancient history of the Iranians. It is different from the Greek and Latin Classics in that the *Shahnameh* was composed in an Islamic milieu with one deity rather than in a polytheistic realm where myths and the activities of the gods were an integral part of the Classic. In my opinion the book of Firdosi is almost revered by Iranians because it is their prehistory and ancient heritage, and it gives them a literary basis for self-identity. Even though the poetry could be described as monotonous, here it is the message which is important unlike other Persian classics.

A final word should be added to the above, relating to the study of

classics in general. Why study or read classics if they have been read and studied by myriads of people for centuries? We return to the classics because each age has different questions to ask about the material in the classics. The reader or the scholar changes as well, and certain approaches or questions we might ask when in school may well be quite different when we grow older. The classics themselves do not change, but they are classics because they provide different vistas for different people in succeeding eras. Classics are universal in appeal and they last throughout the ages because they do provide thought for various persons who approach them. This applies to Persian classics as well as to others, and as such the topic of classics becomes a universal question.

The practical question raised here, however, is why and how foreign classics should be integrated into school or college curricula. Aside from the answer that they are interesting, even emotionally satisfying to read or to hear, why be concerned about classics in foreign tongues, if one is content with those in one's own language? Obviously they provide a good, if not the best, introduction to a foreign culture, to different modes of thought and novel experiences. For example, in a course of world literatures or world cultures, selections from the mystical poems of Jalal-ad-Din Rumi reveal the world of Sufism better than any learned discourse about the mystic's yearning to attain God, his beloved. The English translation of Rumi's *Mathnavi* (book of couplets) by R. A. Nicholson gives us an insight into the language of the mystic poet. The reed which provides a flute for the mystic who plays upon it, is a well known motif:

Listen to the reed, how it tells its tales;
Bemoaning its bitter exile, it wails:
Ever since I was torn from the reed beds,
My cries tear men's and women's hearts to shreds.
Let this separation slit my sad breast
So I can reveal my longing and quest.
Everyone is my friend for his own part,
Yet none can know the secrets of my heart.
The flames of love make the reed's voice divine:
It is love's passion that rages in the wine.

Or consider this poem of mystical love:

This is love to fly heavenward,
To rend, every instant, a hundred veils.
The first moment, to renounce life;
The last step, to fare without feet.
To regard this world as invisible,
Not to see what appears to one's self.

O heart, I said, may it bless thee
To have entered the circle of lovers,
To look beyond the range of the eye,
To penetrate the windings of the bosom.

There are many genres of Persian literature and what amounts to a tiny fraction is mentioned here, and many would dispute that Rumi is surpassed by Hafez and others. But such a dispute over who is the greatest poet or author exists in every culture. Perhaps one should seek those literary productions which seem to be unique to a given culture and present them to students as addenda to common themes of world literature. Those who become more interested in the life of the Iranian world, however, will find a wealth of materials providing fascinating insights into one of the richest and oldest civilizations of the world.

Further Reading

It is impossible to go into details in a short paper, but on the general cultural milieu of the rise of the New Persian language see my book *The Golden Age of Persia*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1975). On the origins of New Persian poetry and its genres see J. Rypka, ed. *History of Iranian Literature*, (Reidel, Dordrecht, 1968) 69–108. For a summary discussion of the ideas of Ibn Khaldun, see Issawi, C., *An Arab Philosophy of History* (John Murray, London, 1950). Note 1 and Lazard, G., *Les premiers poètes persans* (Tehran–Paris, 1964). Nicholson, R. A., ed. and trans. *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi* (Leyden/London), 1925–40.