In return, the signatory Muslims were assured that the building of mosques was only to be limited by the existing building laws and that the Muslim could organize religious matters at will—both banalities and no concessions whatsoever.

This governmental initiative was heavily criticized especially by the Muslim students’ organizations—none of which had been invited—including the Etudiants Musulmans de France (EMF) and the Jeunes Musulmans de France (JMF). These organizations were incensed by the fact that the Muslims had been singled out to reaffirm specific parts of the Constitution, something which had never been demanded of either Catholics or Jews. The banning of “politics” from the mosque, not only because this goes against the grain of Islam, but also because it is a vague formula which virtually invites governmental intervention.

But there are also positive Muslims assessments, stressing that there was now a relatively representative Muslim premium as counterpart to the French government, a step that might prove to be of historic significance if only the Muslims are able to play the game well. These Muslims know that the time was not necessarily on their side. As Ramadan points out, there is an alarming rate of mixed marriages, alarming because in 41% of all cases, in violation of the Shari’ah, Muslims girls in France accept non-Muslim husbands.

Murad Wilfried Hofmann

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The story of modern Persian literature spans the course of the twentieth century and is closely connected with the political history of Iran, from the end of the Qajar dynasty and the rule of the two Pahlavi monarchs to the current Islamic regime. The phenomenon of the break with traditional forms and motifs and the emergence of modernity in Persian literature has only recently become a serious subject of study, the most detailed and recent work in English being Ahmad Karimi Hakkak’s Recasting Persian Poetry (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996). Taking the narrative further in time,
Kamran Talattof’s work is a critical survey of modern Persian literature from the beginnings to the 1990s.

In his ‘introduction’, while mapping the plan for the book the author emphasizes the complex role of ideology in the production of Persian literary texts in the twentieth century, the dominant ones operating in Iran being nationalism, Marxism, feminism and Islamism. Using the works of both European and Iranian literary critics, the concept of “episodic literary movement” is introduced as the theoretical framework, a convenient and useful approach for studying the output of an entire century. The more specific terms that constitute this approach, such as literary episode, ideology of representation, literary movement, and discursive interpretation, etc., are defined and contextualized.

Chapter 2 deals with the episode of “Persianism”, the first phase of literary modernity, when there was a revolt against the traditional in favour of the modern. In a movement that was inspired by nationalist sentiments as well as an unabashed admiration of Western models, old literary forms and themes were discarded or put to new uses and the Persian language itself was reformed to fulfil the requirements of a new age. In prose, Muhammad Ali Jamalzadah and Sadiq Hidayat were the main figures in pioneering a new idiom of Persian prose that was simple and more natural. For these authors, Arabic and Islam were in binary opposition to Persian and Iranian, resulting in a rejection of the former. In poetry, Nima Yushij was the force behind the shi’r-i nau movement that changed the course of the history of Persian poetry in our times by its adoption of free verse and new themes. An examination of some representative works of these writers illustrates the ideology of the new aesthetic that came into being in this period.

Chapter 3 studies the period between “Persianism” and the Islamic revolution, the decades that saw the rise of committed literature produced in an environment that was increasingly critical of the tyranny and despotism of the Pahlavi regime. The fervour of “Persianism” had ended and intellectuals and writers had begun to be critical of the West and did not reject Islam and Arabic outright. The literature of this period was largely inspired by Marxist and Leftist ideals and included authors like Hushang Gulshiri, Samad Bihragi and Ahmad Shamlu. Writings by women authors such as Simin Danishvar and Simin Bihbahani, although feminist in its thrust, fall under the rubric of the larger movement of committed literature.

The major section of the work and the most engaging are chapters 4 and 5, which cover the twenty years since the Islamic revolution, and particularly the extensive body of feminist writing in the period. The revolution, and following that the Iran-Iraq war, gave a tremendous impetus to the production of literature and this period saw an unprecedented burst of creative activity.
The catalogue of the scores of authors and publications connected with this period is useful in gauging the extent of writing, but for the most part is not of any enduring literary interest. An explication of a story of Muhsin Makhmalbaf better known for his films, illustrates the evolution of a writer and artist over the span of two periods. Women writers like Shahrnush Parsipur, Muniru Ravanipur, Simin Danishvar and Simin Bihbihani came into their own during this period as the feminist agenda was no longer subordinate to other ideologies.

In the ‘conclusion’, the author briefly surveys the modernist episodes in the Arabic and Turkish literary movements to show the similar ways in which other Middle Eastern cultures broke with tradition and embraced the new. Comparisons with the corresponding period in the Urdu tradition would also be an extremely fruitful area of study, especially due to Urdu’s historical connection with Persian. Also, although this study is limited to Iran, the Persian-speaking regions of Afghanistan and Tajikistan would seem to merit more than a passing glance for comparative purposes, since they share the same literary and cultural heritage.

Literature, especially in the twentieth century, is the product of multiple factors and is subject to complex strands of influence, political ideology being but one prism with which it can be viewed. There are poets like Mahdi Akhavan Salis, Furugh Farrukhzad and Faridun Mushiri whose writing was not committed to any particular political or religious ideology and will successfully stand the test of time. In addition, it must be kept in mind that the traditional forms like the ghazal and qaṣidah are not obsolete by any means and continue to be utilized. Given all that, this work is an erudite and useful survey of Persian literature in the modern period and provides valuable insights into the forces that shaped the development of this literature. Unfortunately, the book could have been better edited and the many typographical errors and infelicities of transliteration are somewhat distracting. A uniform transliteration system is not used despite the author’s statement to the contrary in the beginning. However, these errors can be rectified if a second edition is ever planned.

Sunil Sharma

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