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Phoenix From the Ashes: A Tale of the Book in Iran

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The history of the book in Iran is a story of a rich culture's resilience, of its ability to endure, and even flourish, through periods of devastation, political chaos, hardship and oppression. It is a story that stretches far back in time, yet even as you read this, that story is still being written.

Iran's relationship with the West is long and complex, fraught with mutual misunderstanding, and often with conflict. That this is still true today, though not surprising, is terribly unfortunate. Surely it is time that all concerned shed the legacy of mistrust and hostility. Certainly, understanding one another's history (especially literary history) can help.

The horrible acts of terror of September 11th were, in my opinion, a tragic lesson to the whole world about the price of living in ignorance of those who are different. The world, we know, has grown smaller, and we are all, more than ever before, dependent on one another. Wherever we live and whoever we are, we can ill afford intolerance or indifference to the experience of others.



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Two years ago, during a visit to Athens, Greece, I found myself in conversation with one of the museum attendants at the Acropolis. When I told him that I am an expatriate Iranian, he remarked on the greatness of the ancient cultures of Persia and Greece. But we were also reminded of the bitter and bloody rivalry between these two civilizations. We agreed that, then as now, the superiority of one great power is predicated on establishing the inferiority of another. But culture is not just about power, and it develops not only through conflict but through communication. And Iran and the West have, despite their conflicts, also been enriched by their contacts.

Antiquity

The earliest Iranian written work to be found thus far consists of a cuneiform inscription dating back to the time of Darius I, a king of the Achaemenid period, who reigned from 522 to 486 B.C.E. Carved in a rock face at the foot of the Zagros Mountains, in the Kermanshah region of Iran, the famous inscription is in three languages -- Babylonian, Old Persian and Elamite. The deciphering of this inscription provided an important key for the study of the cuneiform script.

Iran's oldest book is the *Avesta*, a collection of sacred Zoroastrian writings. The *Avesta* comprises teachings of the prophet Zoroaster (who is also known as Zarathustra), as well as writings on cosmogony, law and liturgy. The text, which is in Avestic, an ancient language of the region, is divided into five main parts, each of which was composed in a different time and place.

Iran's first significant library was established at Estakhr, the

capital of the Achaemenid kings. When, in 331 B.C.E., the city fell to the armies of the Macedonian king Alexander the Great, the library was destroyed by fire. There is still a question as to whether the fire was set accidentally by drunken soldiers or deliberately as revenge for the destruction of Athens by the Persian king Xerxes. At the order of Alexander, most of the scientific and literary works that survived were removed from the ruins and taken to Greece, where they were translated and the originals then destroyed. Following Alexander's conquest, Iranians lived under the rule of his successors, the Macedonian Selucids. The Hellenistic culture they brought dominated life in Iran's cities. But Greek influence led to the stagnation of Iran's own culture.

The destruction of libraries is an unfortunate but frequent occurrence in Iran's history. At the site of the ruins of the library of Rostaghji, now the city of Isfahan, archaeologists have discovered that Iranian kings anticipated the need to save books during times of military invasion. Their solution was to bury especially important volumes, particularly works on astronomy, beneath the library building itself.

The Coming of Islam

During the Sasanid dynasty, from the 3rd century of the Common Era to the 7th, Iran experienced a flourishing of its literary culture. New libraries were built and literature, both religious and secular, was collected. The *Avesta* was reassembled from remnants and standardized during this period, and religious commentary was gathered as well. Non-religious writings included works on astronomy, mathematics, history, medicine, politics, warfare and music. During the reign

of Khosrow I (531-579), foreign works of entertainment -- including Hellenistic romance literature and Indian tales, such as the legend of Barlaam and Josaphat -- were brought into Iran and translated. But all this was to change.

The single most significant event in Iranian history was the Arab invasion and the arrival of Islam in the 7th century. Islam's victory in Iran marked a dramatic break with the country's past. Following his defeat in the battle of al-Qadisiyya, in 637, Yazdegerd III, the last king of the Sasanid dynasty, was forced to flee from his winter capital, Taysafun. The city and its treasures were left to the mercy of the Arab conquerors. The vast royal palace, Taq Kisra, was occupied, and like much of the city, its library was destroyed. The city was then rebuilt, and its deserted ruins were used as building materials.

The Arabs forbade Iranians to use the Persian language. Arabic became the language of law and culture. For two centuries no books -- at least no surviving books -- were written in Persian. Despite Arab censorship, Iranians never stopped speaking their own language. The spoken word became a means of creating and preserving literature. This oral tradition is still alive today.

When one Arab commander was asked by his army what they should do with the Iranians' books, he answered that, since the Qur'an was the only book worth reading and preserving, all books in Persian should be destroyed. Other Arab commanders apparently had similar feelings. Persian works of science, poetry and prose were judged to be immoral and were banned. Arab soldiers set fire to Iran's libraries, burning books or throwing them into rivers, all to destroy the written literature,

which bore witness to the defeated people's past. One group of Zoroastrian priests was able to save parts of the *Avesta*. Another group emigrated to India, taking with them the *Avesta* and other books. Today only a small part of the *Avesta* remains.

The Samanid period (819-999) brought a renaissance of Iranian literature. In their struggle against the Arabs for power and independence, the Samanids used the Persian language as a political weapon. They renewed Persian as a language of literature. This period saw the emergence of Modern Persian, or Farsi, which uses the Arabic alphabet and incorporates many Arabic words. The poet Rudaki revived Persian lyrical poetry. Persian books on such topics as administration, history, science and religion were written and published. Commentaries on the Qur'an were translated from Arabic to Persian.

Before long, Persian became the second major language of Islamic high culture. The intellectual vitality of the Samanid capital, Bukhara, attracted leading scholars and poets, both Persian and Arabic, and the city rivaled Baghdad as the cultural capital of Islam. Many of Bukhara's writers were bilingual and wrote their books in both languages.

The greatest literary achievement of this period was the composition of the Persian national epic, the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings), a book that even today is of signal importance in Iranian cultural life. The *Shahnameh* was written for Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna by the poet Abu Ol-qasem Mansur Ferdowsi, who completed the work in 1010. He gathered and set to verse different prose versions, written in Pahlavi, or Middle Persian, of the histories of the kings of Persia. The epic,

which was 35 years in the writing, consists of nearly 60,000 couplets, and its story spans several thousand years. It begins in mythical times and concludes with the Arab conquest.

The impact of the *Shahnameh* was immense. It reminded Iranians of the country's glorious past. Even today, nearly a thousand years after its completion, this legendary masterwork is read and recited by Iranians of all walks of life, from urban intellectuals to simple village farmers. It is read in teahouses, and many illiterate people learn it by heart so that they can recite it themselves. Islamic fundamentalists do not, of course, honor the *Shahnameh*, because to them Iran's pre-Islamic history does not merit such regard. But even as they hate it, they are nonetheless affected by it, often in ways they are not even aware of. Its influence is pervasive in the idioms of Iranian life -- in the names, words, tales and ideas we use every day.

Over time, Arab hostility to Persian culture abated and was transformed into its opposite. In *The History of Islamic Culture*, the Lebanese historian Jurji Zaydan discusses the great interest the Arabs developed in learning from other nations. They translated into Arabic Greek works in science and philosophy and Persian texts in astronomy, history and music. Historians know of more than 70 Persian texts that were translated into Arabic in the 11th century alone.

The Mongol Invasion

In the 13th century, the Mongol army swept through Iran. The invading forces of Genghis Khan visited terror, death and destruction on the country. The ensuing lack of order left Iran

divided, with Mongol agents controlling some districts and Iranian profiteers ruling others.

The Mongol invasion was soon followed by another catastrophe. In the 14th century, Turkish armies under the command of Lame Timur (who is better known in the West as Tamerlane) invaded Iran. Even today, the name Lame Timur is synonymous, in Iran as well as in Europe, with barbarity. Historians believe that in just the single city of Isfahan, he was responsible for the slaughter of 70,000 people.

These invasions entailed not only the conquest of people and territory but also of culture. The Mongols destroyed much of Iran's cultural life, especially the cultural life of ordinary people. The same can be said of the Turks. Under Turkish rule Iranian scholars served at the pleasure of Turkish-speaking emirs and sultans. Once again, Persian literature fell into decline.

But in the remote province of Fars, the Persian literary tradition was kept alive. In 1257, the poet Sa'di, of the city of Shiraz, composed the *Bustan* (The Orchard), and the following year he wrote the *Golestan* (The Rose Garden). These two works combine prose and verse in a flowing style that is still admired for its achievement of harmony of sound, imagery and content. And this admiration extends beyond Iran, for Sa'di has been translated into many Western languages.

Following Sa'di, Shiraz produced another fine lyric poet, the Sufi mystic Hafiz, who lived from 1325 to 1389. Hafiz's most famous work, the *Divan*, can be found today in nearly every Iranian home, and many Iranians know his poems by heart and can recite them. The extraordinary popularity of Hafiz's

poetry stems from his simple and musical language, his love of humanity, and his contempt for hypocrisy and mediocrity.

Another significant book from this period was the *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi* (Spiritual Couplets), a didactic epic of 26,000 verses by Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273). Rumi is one of Sufism's most revered figures, and his influence on Islamic mystical thought and literature is profound. He is also generally regarded as the greatest poet to write in the Persian language. In Muslim countries, the *Masnavi* is considered by some to be a religious work second in importance only to the Qur'an. His writings have been translated into many languages, and in fact, he has in recent years become one of the most popular poets in the United States.

Over the following centuries, Persian literature and the book culture of Iran continued to flower and decline as the country's political fortunes changed. One of the great achievements during this time was in the art of bookbinding, which began to flourish in the 15th century and continued to do so for several centuries. The ornamental designs and miniature illustrations that adorn many Persian books from this period are still renowned for their beauty.

Modern Times

The early 20th century was another turning point for Iranian culture. In 1906 a constitutional revolution led, in time, to the institution of a parliament, the Majlis, in 1908, and to the creation of limits on the power of the monarch. Iran was making other steps toward modernization as well. A new school system was instituted, thus increasing the ranks of the

educated, and printing presses made available newspapers and journals to serve them. Many young people were sent to Europe for their university education. Having been steeped in knowledge of the Western tradition, they returned to form a new Persian intelligentsia and bring about a reawakening in the cultural life of the country.

Poetry had always been held as the foremost form of literary expression. But in the 20th century, modern prose found its way into the hearts of the Iranian people. In 1921 Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh's collection of short stories, *Yaki bud yaki nabud* (Once Upon a Time), was published, thus ushering in a new era of Persian prose. Considered the founder of modern Persian fiction, he was the first author to write in colloquial Persian.

Poetry was changing as well. Nima Yushij, the father of modern Persian poetry, broke with tradition by using free verse, a form of poetic expression more suitable to modern life. His follower Ahmad Shamlou, modern Iran's leading poet, was as comfortable writing poems expressing his political engagement as he was composing lyrical love poems.

Modernization also brought the opening of Iran's first university, the construction of motorways and of the Trans-Iranian railway, and the emancipation of women. Following the Second World War, Iranians, especially the young and educated, turned their awareness to their country's social and political conditions. In 1952 a nationalistic movement under the leadership of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq brought about the nationalization of the British oil holdings in Iran. Mosaddeq's popularity was enormous, and when the Shah attempted to dismiss him, people took to the streets, and the

wave of protest forced the Shah to leave Iran. But after only a few days, the Shah, with U.S. support, returned to Iran and imprisoned Mosaddeq for three years. He was then placed under house arrest until his death in 1967.

Upon his return to power, the Shah outlawed Mosaddeq's National Front, as well as the Tudeh, or Communist Party. To silence all who opposed him, the Shah, again with U.S. help, built up his secret police force, SAVAK, which was infamous for the savage torture of political prisoners. An extensive censorship apparatus was created, which, despite the overthrow of the Shah by the Islamic Revolution, still functions today.

Operating under the Ministry of Information, the censorship authority controlled, and still controls, the publication of all manuscripts. Nothing can be published without a permit. Even after publication, a book can be deemed immoral or hostile to the regime and be confiscated from bookshops. Sometimes the mere popularity of a book, or a writer, is cause for suspicion, and the authorities may reexamine a text to determine whether to stop new editions.

Iranian writers have described how this censorship functions. After reviewing the manuscript the authorities send the writer a list of words, sentences and pages to be deleted. Before the Revolution, the authorities were sensitive to such words as "red" and "red rose," which symbolized the blood shed during revolution, or "black night" and "high walls," which symbolized prison and repression. Since the Revolution, words with sexual connotations are of special concern to the censors. It is not even permissible to make mention of a woman's breast. In the

censors' vocabulary, this is called "negative censorship."

"Positive censorship," on the other hand, entails suggesting words or sentences that should be added in the text to make it appear milder or more supportive of the regime.

The publication or possession of forbidden books is dangerous for all concerned -- writers, readers, booksellers and publishers -- so those who are not political activists will seldom risk reading them. Under the Shah, *Mother*, by Maxim Gorki, was such a book. Having it in one's home could lead to a three-year jail sentence. Some bookshops, mostly those located near Tehran University and other gathering places for intellectuals, sold forbidden books, but they were not on the shelves. These books were called "white cover books" because of the white dust covers they all had. To buy such a book, one would go to a trustworthy bookseller, who would wrap the book in gift paper before handing it to the customer. This was Iran's version of the Russian samizdat.

In 1979, the repressive regime of the Shah was overthrown and replaced by an Islamic republic. In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, millions of white cover books were sold on the pavements outside Tehran University. But some months later, groups of men *and* women, claiming themselves members of Hezbollah, or God's Party, took control of the streets, smashed the windows of bookshops, and set fire to books they deemed immoral. Soon the new government banned books written by or about the Shah, as well as books dedicated to him or the royal family. Eventually, this censorship extended to books on Marxism, Darwinian evolution, and anything else seen as contradictory to religious

The famous *fatwa*, or Islamic legal opinion, that decreed punishment for anyone having anything to do with Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* might be regarded not as something new but as a continuation of an old heritage, passed down from the Shah, which he in turn inherited from other despots who came before him. It is worth noting that in 1988, one year before the fatwa, another book of Rushdie's, *Midnight's Children*, was published in Iran and was awarded a prize as the best Persian translation of the year. After the fatwa, all copies of it were confiscated.

Iran's war with Iraq, from 1980 to 1988, had a catastrophic impact on Iran's literary life. Censorship hardened, and almost any word or deed could easily be interpreted as treacherous. Publishers and writers were punished for any books judged critical of the government's policies. Because of the lack of foreign currency and the trade blockade imposed by many countries, paper was rationed. Paper was in abundant supply for the publication of religious books and for war propaganda, but the authorities simply stopped distributing paper for publishing anything else. In addition to political obstacles, publishers and writers faced economic obstacles as well. Publishers were reluctant to invest capital in books that might be seen as subversive. Deprived of income, many writers were forced to earn a living working at odd jobs or on the black market.

Books in the Present

After a long period of cultural decline, Iranian literary life is experiencing a resurgence. One need only look at the numbers

to see this. According to official statistics, the number of books published in 1986 was 3,812; in 2001 the figure was 23,305. While high prices prevent many Iranians from buying books, it does not stop their reading them. Books are passed around among relatives and friends, so much so that it is said that a book that sells a thousand copies will have five thousand readers.

The last years of the 20th century saw a new wave of struggle for a tolerant society, and this paved the way for cultural renewal. But the price has often been high. One particularly horrific example of this has been the phenomenon of "chain murders," which entails the kidnapping and murder of a series of victims, whose bodies are then left out to be found.

Mohammad Mokhtari and Jafar Pouyandeh are just two of the writers who have died in this way. But despite the risks, artists and intellectuals have continued to fight for freedom of expression.

At the annual Tehran Book Fair, one can see the eagerness with which Iranian readers pursue their literary interests. One year, the entire printing, 12,000 copies, of a volume of Ahmad Shamlou's poems sold out on just the first day. The role of women in contemporary Iranian literature is also noteworthy, especially when one considers the tremendous discrimination directed against them. The love story *Bamdade khomar* (Morning Hangover), by the young woman writer Fattaneh Haj Seyyed Javadi, has for four years been among the best-selling books in Iran. Now in its 29th printing, *Bamdade khomar* is the first popular book of its kind, "kiosk literature," to be written by a woman. Shahla Lahiji, the winner of this year's Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award, is the first woman to own

and operate a publishing house in Iran. Since its founding in 1983, her publishing house, Roushangaran, has published over 200 titles, many of them with a feminist perspective.

Iranian bookshops are now filled to overflowing, and many of the titles available would have been banned not so very long ago. The biography of Hoveyda, the Shah's last Prime Minister, and the memoirs of the mother of Farah Diba (wife of the Shah) are now in the shop windows. One can even find the journalist Akbar Ganji's book, now in its 26th printing, that caused him to be incarcerated for revealing the responsibility of the authorities in the chain murders of Iranian writers.

Translations of foreign books have long been popular in Iran. The most recent bestsellers of this sort are the Harry Potter books. Since last year, the four volumes have been published in three different translations. Just as they have everywhere else, the books earned a fortune for their publishers.

Everywhere you go in Tehran, people, especially youngsters, are talking about Harry Potter. Which goes to show, we really do live in a global village!

Throughout our history, we Iranians have seen our culture attacked by one invading or despotic regime after another. From Alexander to Lame Timur to Hezbollah, they burn our books, destroy our libraries, censor our language, and rewrite our history. But we see another pattern as well. After each defeat, our culture regathers its strength and revives its creativity, like a phoenix arising from the ashes.



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