

MODERNIST OR ROMANTICIST? ARTISTIC ELEMENTS IN NÎMA YUSHIJ'S AFSANEH

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Abstract

Nima Yushij's Afsaneh, with its revolutionary free verse style, is acknowledged to be a touchstone for Modern Persian Poetry. Yet, a common misconception seems to be prevalent in the literature as to the stylistic classification of this touchstone which ushered in a new era. Afsaneh, for which it sticks out to be more proper to be pronounced as romanticist rather than modernist in terms of its artistic features appears to be designated the other way round. Accordingly, the present study seeks to shed light on the recent misinterpreted situation of Nima Yushij's Afsaneh via scrutinizing its romanticist elements in addition to drawing the academic attention to the semantic difference between the concepts; modernist and modern.

Keywords: Afsaneh, romanticism, modernism, modern.

MODERNİST Mİ, ROMANTİK Mİ? NİMA YUSHİİ'NİN HİKAYELERİNDE SANATSAL ÖGELER

Öz

Nima Yushij'in Afsaneh'i devrim niteliğindeki serbest nazımı ile Modern İran Şiiri açısından bir mihenk taşı olarak kabul edilmektedir. Bununla birlikte, yeni bir çağ açmış olan bu mihenk taşının biçimsel sınıflandırması açısından alanyazında yaygın olarak yanlış bir kabul baskın görülmektedir. Sanatsal özellikleri açısından Modernistten daha çok Romantik akıma ait olarak ifade edilmesinin daha uygun olduğu aşikâr olan Afsaneh'in tam tersi bir şekilde anıldığı gözükmemektedir. Böylelikle mevcut çalışma Nima Yushij'in Afsaneh'inin yanlış yorumlanan şu anki durumuna, akademik ilgiyi modernist ve modern kavramlarının anlamsal farkına çekmeye ek olarak, şiirin romantik akıma ait unsurlarının detaylı olarak incelenmesi yoluyla ışık tutmayı denemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afsaneh, romantizm, modernizm, modern.

INTRODUCTION

Persian literature, which is fictitious in trait, may be embodied via four main traditions the first one of which appears to enact in the 9th century following the emergence of neo-Persian language directly appealing to the commonality while the second one of which may be identified as the belletristic court tradition that maintains its coexistence with the first one until our present day. Yet, different from courtly features, the normative standards of this second tradition seem to have molded in a remarkable style adopted by the literary traditionalists who delineate the characteristics of this very tradition with the norms sustained from Rudaki (d. 940) to Jami (d. 1492). Then in the third place, is noticeable the literature form conveying Sufistic patterns that emerged mainly against the court life of the period in the wake of the early 13th century Mongol invasions. As for the final tradition in this context, a highly remarkable 20th century revolutionary movement towards a modern Persian literature may be singled out from the aforementioned others as a direct reflection of the newly born Persian nationalism. This contemporary literature which utilizes a language colloquial in style dwells much on individual aspects of cultural phenomenon that occurred following the WWII (Hillmann 1982).

Nevertheless, to what extent “modernism” would be a proper term for this stream or which specific works of this stream possess the ability to reflect the very characteristics of the term seems to be a case of serious discussion in that modernism is employed in two main senses in particular. First, in general terms, modernism is utilized as a generic label that represents the entire earnings of the Western tradition secured by Renaissance and its aftershocks. As an umbrella term, in this respect, modernism covers all other streams, realism, naturalism, surrealism, romanticism etc. since the development of all these stems from emancipation from scholasticism. In a more specific sense, however, it refers to a specific stream which could be uttered as one of the major border stones that had groundbreaking impact on the previous century; an impact so strong to the extent that the entire culture of twentieth century simply rests on the very features provided by this stream. Accordingly, the overlapping semantic situation of the terms “modernity” and “modernism”, leads to a common misconception with the use of these terms in arts also. While the former is ascribed to the aforementioned generic label that indicates the gradual historical development of Western tradition, the latter stands out to be the name of a specific stream pertaining to a specific period that virtually affected the entire previous era.

The preliminary precursors of modernism, in this latter sense, may be enunciated to have appeared in Vienna and its vicinity first in between the dates of 1890-1910 while having further influential examples peculiarly as discrete art movements such as Dadaism, Surrealism, Cubism and Futurism. Hard to differentiate it, save for only slight differences, from postmodernism that is acknowledged to initiate with Jean-François Lyotard’s work “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” in 1982, modernism some twenty years earlier than postmodernism started to eliminate the direct borders that delineate the genres with a strict rebellion against traditional realism. Very similar to the main elements of arts such as music, architecture and painting, modernism ushered in a substantial change in literature with the works of great western figures such as Joyce, Elliot, Woolf, Proust, Kafka, etc. re-defining the constituents of writing process starting from the perspective we perceive the reality, the way we narrate it, the course we design the plots towards, and the meaning we create the works for. Hence, during its heydays from 1910 to 1930, this new stream relinquished the old precise, objective, omniscient, well detached, continuous, and societal interest-targeted style in exchange for a vaguer plane that entails reader’s attention and imagination more during the analysis of the text (Barry 1995).

Quite different from these submitted heretofore, the turning point of Persian literature, rather than modernism, sticks out to be a process of modernization for which Nima Yushij’s “Afsaneh” and Mohammad 'Ali Jamalzadeh's “Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud” would be adopted as formal

beginning thresholds, first one of which may serve as the archetype of modern free verse poetry while the latter may be a good representative of nascent Persian modern prose (Talattof 2000).

Nîma, after all, who is without any reservation acknowledged to be the founding father of modern Persian poetry, realized a great revolution with his *Afsaneh* daring to break the boring and monotonous rhyme convention of Persian poetry that was nothing more than a vicious circle. As a pioneer opening a new horizon for his successors, Nîma was, of course, relentlessly criticized by the Persian traditionalists at the beginning. What he did was so unacceptable an imprudence on their side that they started a campaign against him accusing him of imitating romantic western figures in style. Nîma, who was educated at a French catholic school in his childhood naturally had good French and was well informed about Western tradition, and also French romantics not surprisingly (Naficy 1999). Thus, his contemporaries as fervent traditionalists relating the foundation of his style to his childhood education tried to make the most of this situation. However, this so-called imitative style of Nîma has long been identified with the modernist foundation of Persian literature, which constitutes the core of the present study.

Accordingly, *Afsaneh* and its new style being the focal point of this study, the romantic elements in this celebrated poet's work will sought to be scrutinized in order to accentuate the stylistic features which would be more proper to enunciate as romanticist rather than modernist in the light of similar analysis existent in the literature.

Afsaneh as a Romanticist Modern Persian Masterpiece

Romanticism, as a period most generally identified with main figures of poetry such as William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), George Gordon, 6th Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) and John Keats (1795-1821) is acknowledged to be so arduous a concept to mark out its borders on a unanimous plane (Forward n.d.). Nevertheless, the widely accepted common features like subjective assessment of the outer world, flamboyant language, abstract themes such as love, ideals, spiritual concerns, a clear focus on feelings than reason, nature as beauty, pursuit of aesthetic elements indicate that a literary work may be labelled as romantic in style (White n.d.).

In view of this general framework submitted above, Nîma Yushij's poem *Afsaneh* stands out to be a work composed within the borders of romanticism instead of modernism. *Afsaneh*, since the very day it came into prominence with its unusual style for Persian literature has been on the agenda being juxtaposed with the Romantic Age poets of western literature. Although conscious of his purposeful innovation in the way he inscribed his poem with his lines taking part in the preface of his poem, Nîma still labels his work as a ghazal;

This structure that my *Afsaneh* has been placed in, and which demonstrates a natural and free-flowing style of conversation, may not appeal to you at first, and you may not like it as much as I do. Also, you might ask why a ghazal should be so long and the words used in it so light, compared to the ghazals of the classical poets? Yet, this is precisely what I meant to accomplish: freedom in expression and the lengthening of the discourse... (Papan-Matin 2004: 174)

Nevertheless, the structure which Nîma emphasizes as such, breaks the traditional uniformity of ghazal consisting of 5-line stanzas embracing a quatrain of 4 lines in each. Instead, he employed a frequent "Fâilatün/mefâilün/fa'lün" poetic meter whereby he succeeds to impart a romantic tone to his masterpiece with several exceptions similar to those of line 49 and line 50. After all, the conventional suprasegmental of a ghazal which reveals the identities of the speakers defining them within the general course of the poem is revoked via giving the speakers' names outside each speaker's utterance in advance (Erfani & Nosrati 2015). At this juncture, Oroskhan & Zohdi (2016: 27) provide a good example of this stylistic innovation also projecting upon the romantic elements *Afsaneh* embraces as follows:

Lover says: Yet the wave that move on turbulent
 Carry on its lip a tale about you
 Your lips were smiling in that wave
Afsaneh says: I saw on that agitated wave
 A hectic lone rider
Lover says: But I reach a rose-face beauty
 Her hair entangled like an enigma
 Like a restless whirlwind (Nima 2011: 41-42)
 ...
Lover says: Oh Afsaneh, Afsaneh, Afsaneh
 I am the target of your arrow
 Remedy of the heart, medicine for pain
 For my nocturnal cries
 What do you mean to do with me, so scourged?
 And what are you, you hidden from my view. (Nima 2011: 42)

Admitting to the difficulty of demarcating the borders of romanticism, they still seek to shed light on the romantic artistic elements of Afsaneh in the light of Abram's romantic lyric structure which he codified utilizing the works of choice mid-seventeenth and eighteenth century romantic English figures such as Denham, Gray in addition to those of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats Oroskhan & Zohdi (2016).

In a similar study of theirs in the same year, Oroskhan & Zohdi take the romantic scrutiny on the stylistic elements of Afsaneh one step further, applying the concept of Byronic Hero coined by Morse Peckham to the poem in a manner to consolidate it with the state of negative romanticism (2016).

By the same token, Erfani & Nosrati evaluate Afsaneh as a collection of lyric verses that involve certain kind of abstraction of natural fabrics to a great extent referring to the inner worlds of the figures animated through a simple style of figurative speech in a dramatical way, which lacks in the monotonous cliché-ridden mode of the classical Persian poetry (2015).

Above all, in a positive manner, Naficy was one of the most substantial figures who underlined this romanticist elements that Afsaneh houses in. Resembling Nima to Dante in *La vita nuova* and *The Divine Comedy*, with his words: "Nima, in the poem 'Afsanah,' like Dante in *La vita nuova* and *The Divine Comedy*, believes in Love as the only motive force of the whole universe" (p. 29) creates a common denominator of western tradition underlining the romanticist aspect of the poem in a strikingly pretentious way.

Correspondingly, Karimi-Hakkak, & Talattof (2004) gives Paul Lasensky's evaluation of Afsaneh in his *To Tell Another Tale of Mournful Terror: Three of Nima's Songs of the Night* as a vindication of bearing romanticist elements as he differentiates Afsaneh from three other poems of Nima putting a "French romantic inspiration" (p. 7) label on it.

Last but not least, Milani (2008) puts the emphasis more on the modernity that Afsaneh brought to Persian poetry than the romantic elements it bears. He, surprisingly but almost truly, stands the case on its head, and focuses on the individualistic elements that this love poem possesses through utilizing its romantic aspect this time. In his standpoint, besides the revolutionary style of Nima against the traditional Persian Poetry, it is "the individualist sensibility of the poet instead of omniscient vision of the divine", which is implemented in Afsaneh as "a concrete contemporary individual, looking at things that are concrete in time and place from the perspective of a single solitary soul" (p. 902).

CONCLUSION

Afsaneh, first published in 1922, opened a new horizon for Persian Poetry adding modern aspects to the ground it occupies. With its free verse style, Afsaneh, enabled Nîma's followers to seize the opportunity for breaking the limiting dull confinements of traditional Persian poetry. As such, it created a space for what is acknowledged to be modern leaning to the individual standpoint a poet should possess within his or her poetry, which is exactly the same situation for the works of Shakespeare who stands out to be a case in point for English literature (Milani, 2008). Still, modernity and modernist being two discrete concepts has long been employed interchangeably leading to a catastrophic misconception in literature. What is more, this mistake would most frequently be committed even by experienced academic and literary figures. Thus, the main aim of the current study has been to accentuate the artistic elements of Afsaneh with the intention first to analyze and then make it fit to one of the main literary streams. In this sense, preliminarily, the general misconception as to the use of the terms modernist and modern has been sought to be resolved by explicating the two contexts modernism is employed. This way, it would become easier, sensible and sound to overcome the burden of conforming it to a literary stream.

Ultimately, given the information submitted heretofore, Afsaneh as a solemn masterpiece standing with all its dignity and reaching beyond the old cliché of traditionalists should more becomingly convey the label of a romanticist modern poem rather than a modernist romantic poem in terms of its artistic features.

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