

## **Literary Subterfuge and Contemporary Persian Fiction: Who Writes Iran?**

*Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami*

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For at least the past several decades, Persian literary scholarship has drawn its conceptual framework largely from the social sciences. Despite several noteworthy exceptions, a tendency to read Persian literature for its sociopolitical content still guides the way scholars write about and teach the field today. Indeed, a brief survey of course syllabi with “Persian literature” in their titles would no doubt reveal that instructors (the present writer included) by and large introduce writers and their works based on non-literary socio-historical developments, either arranging texts chronologically by their years of production or presenting them (still usually chronologically) as reflections of the historical events, social movements, and ideological currents that shaped the societies from which those texts arose.

Mehdi Khorrami’s *Literary Subterfuge and Contemporary Persian Fiction: Who Writes Iran?* challenges this trend, arguing that we do a great disservice to both individual texts and literary studies as a discipline when we consider non-literary factors as the primary criteria by which to analyze and schematize literary works. Instead, while acknowledging the importance of social, historical, and ideological contexts, in other words the world outside the text, Khorrami’s study of contemporary Persian fiction contends that we must scrutinize the world inside the texts – their aesthetic, linguistic, and formal devices and concepts – to develop a comprehensive view of literature’s historical evolution.

The work under review argues that modernist Persian fiction evolves from a counter-discursive to a non-discursive position vis-à-vis official discourses in Iran, primarily under the Islamic Republic. The author’s conception of discursivity relates directly to his understanding of the term *modernist*. The single

quality unifying Iranian modernists, he argues, has been their pursuit of an individual voice, a personalized language freed from already established clichés and concepts or, to use a spatial metaphor, a self-referential universe carved from the writer's imagination as opposed to the world outside the text. A work can therefore be classified as more or less modernist based on the degree to which the author departs from conventional language, devices, and forms. *Discourse* is a necessarily nebulous term, which is why Khorrami prefers the term *discursivity*. Nonetheless, if we take *discourse* very broadly to mean a system of signs and concepts that relies upon fixed linguistic usage and established, universalized meanings, then we can begin to understand how modernism as an aesthetic project always maintains some tension – if not wholly subverts – the dominant discourse.

Khorrami does not argue that literature's sociopolitical contexts should be altogether ignored. In fact, he openly condemns the Islamic Republic's policies and rhetoric surrounding a broad range of issues. Furthermore, the book's introduction includes a tragicomic account of the difficulties that Iranian censorship places before any Persian literary scholar. The point, however, is that since modernist Persian fiction's trajectory toward non-discursivity means that texts move farther from the world of already existing concepts toward an individual aesthetic space, we cannot use the discourses of politics, religion, sociology, and so on to understand the work that fiction performs. So, for example, we will not encounter an extended discussion of feminism as a social movement in contemporary Iranian society because Khorrami is not interested in arguing that a work's content "expresses" feminism as an ideology. However, he does consider how a writer's unconventional language or narrative structures do not conform to the official discourse's conceptions of femininity, gender, sexuality, and other topics.

It is precisely fiction's relationship with the official discourses, then, that evolves. Whereas the counter-discursive position early in the trajectory means that writers offer a view of reality in direct opposition to that of officialdom, writers at the later non-discursive stage do not engage with the existing discourses at all; rather, they create worlds that no grand narrative or totalizing ideology can explain in full. This trajectory lends the book its structure. In a refreshing divergence from many commonly cited studies of Persian literature, Khorrami presents writers neither chronologically nor thematically and likewise avoids the sort of superfluous biographical and extra-literary contextual information that forces simplistic readings on complex literary works. Instead, the book begins with more discursive – and therefore less modernist and "literary" – writings and moves toward texts marked by their non-discursivity.

Chapter 1 considers prison writing as counter-discursive to the Islamic Republic's official narratives and rhetoric. As the title "From prison reports to prison literature" suggests, Khorrami identifies a literary evolution wherein earlier reports "offer a precise picture of what has actually taken place," while later writings maintain "a distance from th[e] actualities" that the reports sought to capture (p. 47). Most of the chapter, however, does not present close readings of either prison reports or prison literature. On the contrary, to demonstrate prison literature's counter-discursivity, the chapter primarily documents the incarceration, torture, and, most significantly, the official Islamic discourse through which the establishment legitimizes itself and physically eradicates its Others.

While emphasizing that the chapter does not exhaustively catalogue the Islamic Republic's methods for suppressing opposing narratives, Khorrami nonetheless draws from an impressive range of dissident reports, official accounts, and secondary studies to present a disturbing overview of state violence on the discursive and physical levels. Whereas the official discourse characterizes Iran's prisons as "education centers" that rehabilitate misguided individuals through humane acts of Islamic justice, prison writings dispel such a characterization by affirming the presence and abuse of political prisoners throughout the legal and penitentiary systems. The chapter ends with Khorrami's close reading of Ali Erfan's short story "Les Damnées du paradis" as representative of the literary counter-discourse. The story depicts similar violence and abuse as those found in prison reports, but also develops abstract and surreal narrative devices that distinguish it from other counter-discursive but non-literary accounts.

Chapter 2 investigates narrative strategies that contest, complicate, or destabilize official histories. Any official discourse, Khorrami argues, requires a monolithic and stable version of the past; only those who hold power in a given society may determine what has transpired and what such events mean. Literature therefore performs one of its most subversive and hence significant acts by "rewriting" history. In some cases, this rewriting involves the straightforward act of reporting events that the official discourse seeks to erase or deemphasize. Here, Khorrami raises the case of "report-stories" that, as the name suggests, include elements of both journalistic reporting and fictive narration. As an example, he analyzes how a story by Farkhondeh Hajizadeh depicts the author's memories of her brother and nephew's murders (they were victims of the so-called "chain killings" in the late 1990s), but also alludes to the *Shahnameh* and narrates in a stream-of-consciousness style. These literary elements highlight the report-story's personal and imaginative nature that, more than simply countering another version, undermines official discourse

by demonstrating how any account of the past is necessarily personal, arbitrary, and incomplete.

From this last point, Khorrami takes up a number of narratives that perform more complex subversions of official history. In Reza Baraheni's novels, he sees graphic violence and obscene or "incorrect" language as challenging sterilized depictions of medieval and pre-Islamic Persianate courts. In Bahram Beyzai's dramas and screenplays, Iranian mythology provides an opportunity to "construct new prisms for readers to see the world and, in fact, to challenge the narratives of the [Arab Muslims] who won the military battle" against the Persian Sasanians (p. 101). Reza Julai's style of magical realism destabilizes the very notion of objective reality, for his stories do not respond to any particular ideological position but treat reality as fluid challenges to any individual or group that claims an exclusive hold on "objective and subjective spaces" (p. 117). Along with several additional examples, Khorrami also offers a fascinating overview of the official discourse as articulated in the journal *Adabiyāt-e Dāstāni* (Fiction). Citing its publication of statements from Iran's two supreme leaders, Khorrami convincingly demonstrates how Iranian officialdom has intervened in literary production to define aesthetic and discursive spaces. The chapter ultimately argues that Iranian writers have not only countered such discourses, but that they have also created entirely separate discourses in which history, in the broadest sense of the word, becomes reimagined, rethought, and redefined.

Chapter 3 turns finally to non-discursive fiction. Khorrami's identification of non-discursivity as a central component of modernist literature and his explications of non-discursive texts in this chapter most notably set *Literary Subterfuge and Contemporary Persian Fiction* apart from other studies in the field. The most "literary" works, according to Khorrami, are those that create situations or "moments" (a concept he adopts from Lefebvre) that we live through the texts. Literature, in other words, should allow the reader to *experience* moments, not impose a definition upon them or fit them into already-formed concepts. Persian critics have missed this point by asking how competing discourses – Marxism, feminism, nationalism, and others – inform the situations that authors create. Khorrami voices a twofold critique of discourse-oriented readings, arguing that critics have not only misread literary works in search of ideological content but also, in doing so, have overlooked some of the finest works of Persian fiction precisely because they do not support ideological readings.

The chapter introduces and analyzes too many overlooked works to mention all of them here. But Khorrami locates a germ of non-discursivity in

Sadegh Hedayat's celebrated novella *Būf-e Kūr* (*The Blind Owl*), in which the narrator states his particular goal as being able "to describe or to know himself or, as he puts it, to introduce himself to his shadow which is cast on the wall" (p. 188). This self-reflection and self-referential nature becomes the unifying factor for other non-discursive writing; non-discursive authors seek to develop a unique voice and then with that voice to create a reality that did not exist before its expression in the text. It bears repeating that Khorrami is therefore less interested in the "content" of fiction than in the devices that writers employ to shape their literary realities.

Khorrami engages with Guy Debord's theory on the "society of the spectacle" throughout the book, but the richness of his engagement only becomes fully apparent in the third chapter. If the modern society of the spectacle creates passive subjects who merely view or spectate the world and perform their pre-defined functions within it, then literature's subterfuge occurs most significantly in the way that it disrupts the existing order and allows us to experience the world anew. The further that a text diverges from discursivity, the more it demands that we live through the text's moments on their own terms. In other words, non-discursive texts allow us to participate in new and not-yet-defined realities; our knowledge of outside theories or previously deployed literary devices will not suffice for making meaning from what we experience on the page. Even though a modernist writer may hold no particular extra-literary ideological commitment, one easily sees how non-discursive writing poses a grave threat to the representatives of official discourse. The imperative to imagine new realities will, after all, always threaten those who seek to define and regulate the existing society. Thus, in the case of Iran, Khorrami argues that non-discursive writers have not escaped the charge of raising "oppositional" voices.

*Literary Subterfuge and Contemporary Persian Fiction* offers a valuable contribution to literary history and criticism. Persianists will benefit from Khorrami's encyclopedic knowledge of modernist Persian fiction, not to mention his timely and thorough engagement with critical theory extending well beyond the Persian tradition. Students of other national literatures would do well to read the book as a model of literary history/criticism that keeps sight of the highly politicized spaces in which aesthetic texts are produced and disseminated. Finally, social scientists might appreciate the clarity and complexity with which Khorrami demonstrates the limitations inherent to the non-literary disciplines when it comes to interpreting works of literature.

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