

# An Introduction to the Background of Modern Poetry (*Shere Nau*) of Iran

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“Unlike dates, periods are not facts, they are retrospective concepts that we form about past events, useful to focus discussion but very often leading historical thoughts astray.”<sup>1</sup>

(G.M. Trevelyan)

To discuss the background to the “*Shere Nau*” Modern Poetry of Iran, I feel it necessary first to discuss the movements and social changes which prepared the background for modernism.

The industrial revolution can be marked as an event of outstanding moment in the history of modernism. The Industrial Revolution gave birth to a technological society which in its approach to cultural values presented entirely a different pattern from that of the feudal and agricultural societies. Now industries, instead of agriculture were made the basic means of livelihood and determinants of way of life. An exodus from villages to cities started. Workers and labourers also began to be reckoned as a significant class in the society.<sup>2</sup>

Industrial society in the course of its progress, gave birth to Marxism which as a philosophy produced the concept of dialectical materialism. These ideologies emerged in reaction to certain shortcomings and imperfections of Industrial society. Dialectical materialism was also a philosophy that contradicted the absolutism of legal. Thus Marx made manifest the importance and role of materialism in our lives. Marx's contemporary Darwin by propounding his theory of Evolution, hinted towards change, reversal, renewal and continuity as the main characteristics of this universe. Thus he also supported and strengthened the Marxian concept of dialectical materialism.

The West, which had set out to capture the markets for the

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1. Modernism, p. 19, John Macfarelaenes and Malcolm Braudbery Penguin Book 1975.
  2. Some of the views have been inferred from an Urdu article of Prof. W. Akhtar,

discharge of its industrial output and colonised Asia and Africa for this purpose had to sustain the damages of two world wars in consequence. The two world wars brought disintegrations, frustration and chaos in their wake. In fact the beginning of twentieth century in the West is the beginning of the decline in classicism and classical perfection in almost all social institutions.

At this juncture, Freud's theory of psycho-analysis and also existentialism came forth as major constituent elements for shaping the modern mind and modern literary milieu.

Existentialism after the first world war, first manifested itself in Germany and then starting spreading to the other parts of Europe. After the second world war it had emerged as a very influential and serious subject of discussion in academic circles. Existentialism is a tendency or attitude which makes man feel that he is not a plaything of any predetermined process. It provokes man to lay stress on the freedom of human personality and the importance of will as opposed to reason.

As existentialism is more a tendency than a philosophy, its exponents rarely hold identical opinions but in general it can be characterised as a system of thought in which the existence of every individual is as a being who chooses, who thinks and who contemplates.

The Irrational connotation of existentialism seeks its origin in the "concluding unscientific post script of Kierkegaard in which he ridicules the Hegelian view that "Real is rational and rational is real."<sup>1</sup>

Sartre in the absence of defined regulations and established values hinted towards the responsibilities of man as an individual.

"Man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulder, he is responsible for the work and for himself as a way of being."<sup>2</sup>

Existentialism gave birth to the concept of absurdity as a vital view of life and thus dejection, spiritual depression and uncheerfulness gained recognition as a general sign of Modernism and Modern thinking.

These signs got their first expression in the fine arts rather than literature because the fine arts happen to be freer than literature

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1. Meaning that the world is a national system.
  2. Being and nothingness—Sartre, p. 707, New York, 1977.

from social commitments. Ortagaygasset supports this view.

“Signs of changes in collective sensibility are likely to show first in art and pure sciences, precisely because they are the freest activities, the least dependent on social conditions.”<sup>1</sup>

I am also of the view that the fine arts play a preparatory role for literature to accept the changes in the land-scape of collective sensibility. This is the case with Modern literature too.

The 19th century saw several innovations in painting, particularly in France. Cezanne (who only died in 1906) as well as the later artists, Arp, Derain, Rauault, Matisse, Klee, Chagall, Archipenko, Picasso, etc. are amongst the prime exponents of Modernism who paved the way for innovations in literature.

In literature the forerunners of Modernism can be divided into two groups. The first group includes those who like Cezanne, belonged to the 19th century as, Strenberg, Chekhov, Henry James etc. The second group comprises those who achieved their reputation in the second decade of the 20th century: Gide, Proust, Claudel, Valery and Apollinaire in France; Mann, Kafka, Hesse, George and Rilke in Germany. In the United Kingdom and America; Yeats, Pound, Joyce, Lewis, Eliot etc.

The above names serve to indicate that first in painting and then in literature, Modernism and its constituent principles and intrinsic elements had started to come to light before the first world war and by the post second world war period they were firmly established.

The twentieth century Persian literature can be classified into three groups. The first group consists of poets who still adhered to the classical values of didacticism and lyricism as the main qualities of poetry. The notable representatives of this group are: Rashid Yasemi, Mahdi Hamidi, M.H. Shahriyar and Rahi Mu, ayiri. The second group consists of the revolutionaries committed to the topical problems of Socio political nature and seeking the subject matter of their poetry in the adversity and misery of the poor and neglected classes of the society. The representatives of this group are M.A. Afrashta<sup>2</sup> the journalist and editor of Chelengar, Ehsan Tabri, editor of Mardom, Zhla Sultani, Ali Jalali. The third comprises of the poets who have accepted the need for change in the land scape of

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1. Modernism, p. 83.

2. Afrashta died in 1958,

the poetry. This group is represented by Neema and his camp-followers, and their poetry is known as "*Sher-e-Nau*". The "*Shere Nau*" is concordant with modernism as discussed and defined above. Thus the salient points of the subject matter incorporated in *Shere Nau* would be as below :

- (1) A belief in the absurdity of life.
- (2) A sense of the meaninglessness of human existence.
- (3) The concept of man as an individual being, captured and tortured by loneliness.
- (4) A disbelief in grandeur.
- (5) A conviction about the sterility and futility of the world.

Technological advancement made materialism inevitable and the trouble that ensued from it was that the human mind was deprived of its dearest thing, the ideal world of its own spiritualism. It tried to seek reparations from the world of dream and from the symbolic properties of language. Why modern literature is complex and symbolic and does not take kindly to flatness, can be best understood in this prespective.

The *Shere Nau* of Iran mirrors the new mind of the Iranian intelligentsia and comprehends in itself the experiences of modern life, which is expressive of negativeness, instability, grief, sorrow, despair and depression as opposed to the values of the classical poetry viz : Stability, positiveness, hopefulness, grandeur and perfection. This is why the language of *Shere Nau* appears to be coarse in texture, disjointed, impolite and acrimonious.

In addition to the above described features, complex linguistic structures, looseness in prosodic pattern and symbolic and metaphorical expressions are also amongst the characteristics which distinguish *She-re-Nau* from classical poetry. Love for metaphor and ingenuity in metaphorical expressions have brought *Sh-ere-Nau* closer to Sabk-e-Hindi or Indian style Persian poetry. Figurative attributes, subtlety, labyrinthine expressions, love for delicate thoughts and involved meanings etc. which are considered to be the qualities of Indian style Persian poetry are also conspicuously noticeable in "*Shere Nau*".

Neema published his famous poem "Afsana" in the year 1300 A.H. The year can be marked as a turning point in the history of persian poetry. In this poem and in his other creative efforts he freed persian poetry from the prosodic redundancy and suggested the practicability of free verse. The form of modern poetry charac-

terised by free verse in strophic and non-strophic forms, irregular rhymes and use of changing rhythmic patterns in a single poem took the shape of a school and exerted its impact on the new generation.

Faridun Tavalluli, Ismael Shahrudi, Bamdad, Ummid, Furugh Farrukhzad, Nadir Nadirpore, Saya, Atashi, Shebani, Khanlari etc. are amongst these who imparted strength and added new dimensions to the endeavour of Neema.

The poets of "*Shere Nau*" are also grouped into three conspicuous trends : (i) Those who remained simply adherent to the style of Neema, such as, Atashi, Shahrudi, Ummid, Saya etc. ; (ii) Those who followed the style of Neema but advanced beyond it, such as Farugh, Bamdad, Ahmed Reda Ahmadi, Auji etc. ; and (iii) Those who accept the influence of Neema but prefer to serve as a bridge between classical and Modern poetry. These include Tavalluli, Khanlari and Nadir Nadir Pore.

# Three Representative Poems from Three Groups

## AT THE BANK OF A RIVER

By NEEMA<sup>1</sup>

An old tortoise is hanging around a river.  
It is a bright sunny day.  
The rice-field is hot.  
The tortoise is lounging in heat,  
and enjoying a repose

At the bank of the river.

Lonely at the bank of the river,  
wounded in spirit owing to the affliction of desire,  
I wait impatiently for my sun.  
But my eyes fail to catch it.  
My sun has disappeared into the waters at the distance.  
Every thing from every where has come to the surface  
Whether due to slowness or haste,  
There is no sun but the sun of mine  
At the bank of the river.

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1. Ali-Asfand yari Neema Ushcech.

## I D

By FARIDUN TAVALLULI

Like a broken-winge'd owl, on this barren Id  
I am sitting in my sad crypt.  
I am sitting and hope that the "new year" would come forth  
and would shed the burden from its tired shoulders,

It wipes out the sweat from the face covered with dust  
stuns me and recognises me properly  
Shakes my shoulders and stirs me "to arise",  
"This mound, is the provision for the drudgery of one year's  
span",

“Various toils which has—tied the hands of fate”  
 “In this astonishment, the charge of trusteeship in your name”  
 “The impudent predestination like the serpent in the bushes”  
 “has opened the thirsty throat, in the hope of your stepping  
 in !”

“The wine cup of life on my palm has gone old.”  
 “Drink to the ensuing despair”  
 “See through another year and in this bitter waiting.”  
 “lament for the ungratified wishes !”

like a broken winged owl, on this barren Id  
 I am glad that no creature would care to enquire of me !  
 I am glad, the gloomy death' in this collyrium like evening  
 would root out the two eyes and would blossom on my light.

## MIST

By AHMED BAMDAD SHAMLU

The desert has completely been captured by the mist,  
 The light of the village is invisible.  
 The hot wave runs through the blood of the desert.  
 The desert-worn out tounge tied  
 breathless  
 slowly sheds its sweat, in the hot delirium of the mist.

“The desert has completely been captured by the mist  
 (the passer by murmurs).  
 “Dogs of the village are silent.  
 “Wrapped in the quilt of the mist”  
 I reach my home. Gul Ku  
 does not know. Suddenly beholds me at the thurshold  
 tears in eyes,  
 Smile on his lips, would say :  
 “The desert has completely been captured by the mist...I was  
 possessed with the thought  
 that if the mist stood firm till the morning  
 the brave men from their secret places  
 would drop the idea to visit their dear ones.”  
 The desert has completely been captured by the mist.

The light of the village is invisible,  
 The hot wave runs through the desert of the village.  
 A desert-worn out and tounge tied  
 breathless, slowly sheds its tears, in the hot delirium of the  
 mist....