7. The Reception of Classical Persian Poetry in Anglophone World: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract: The impact of Persian literature on world culture and literature is undeniable. Persian poets such as Firdowsi, Sa'di, Hafiz, Rumi and Khayyam who deal with universal themes beyond a particular place and time are among the most widely-known literary figures of the world; their works are translated into different languages. Despite the fact that there are different translations of Persian literature in English, it is still not clear whether Persian literature has gained its appropriate place in the world. We study the reception of Persian literature in general and classical Persian poetry in particular in Britain and The United States to see whether it is rightly introduced to these countries or not. A close study of the reception of Persian poetry in Anglophone world in general and in Britain and The United States in particular reveals that while Persian literature is introduced and taught in these countries, it is still far from being truly known there. Those who have been familiar with Persian literature have mainly known it through translations by western scholars, and this has led to problems and misconceptions. As Edward Said argues in Orientalism, the orient is never truly depicted by the west. The best way would be to have Persian scholars of English literature translate Persian works into English.

Keywords: Classical Persian Poetry, Anglophone World, Translation, Britain, the United States.

FULL TEXT

Introduction

The impact of Persian literature on world culture and literature is undeniable. Emerson, Arnold, Goethe, Tagore and Forster are but a few examples of literary figures influenced by Persian literature. Persian poets such as Firdowsi, Sa'di, Hafiz, Rumi and Khayyam who deal with universal themes beyond a particular place and time are among the most widely-known literary figures in Europe; their works are translated into different European languages.

Despite the fact that there are different translations of Persian literature in English, such as Arbery's translation of Rumi, Davis' translation of *Shahnameh*, Fitzgerald's translation of Khayyam and various translations of Hafez, it is still not clear whether Persian literature has gained its appropriate place in the world. Regarding the cultural background of Iran and the significant role of culture in the globalization, Persian literature needs more thorough work on the part of scholars and translators to be justly introduced to the world.

The present paper focuses on the above points. We study the reception of Persian literature in general and classical Persian poetry in particular in Britain and The United States to see whether it is rightly introduced to these countries or not.

Discussion

In each of Britain, Germany, and France as three examples of European countries, one Persian literary figure is dominant; Khayam in Britain, Hafez in Germany and Sa'di in France are known as the most celebrated Persian figures. This fact does not mean that other figures are not known in these countries; but it shows the preference of a nation for a Persian figure.

In Britain

Luckily Hafez, Saadi, Khayyam, Rumi, Nezami and Ferdowsi are well-received in Britain and different renditions of them are available there while other figures are either not translated or not known. Although Persian studies in the academia goes back to the opening of Arabic chairs in the universities Cambridge and Oxford in England, studying the translation of Persian poetry to English begins a century later. This movement is indebted to literary and linguistic skills of William Jones. The fact that Persian was the official language of Indian court also contributed to the movement. From the direct control of East Indian Company by the British in 1784, Persian programs were avidly followed in India and Britain and some

Persian poets were introduced to the British audience. British colonization of India was the starting point for exposing the English-speaking people to the Persian literary heritage. The shrewd colonizers realized the necessity of learning Persian to have direct contact with the Indian courtiers. Hence, they became familiar with Persian literature and enjoyed reading Saadi, Hafez and Khayyam. Persian language was not only a means of communication with the subjects, but a necessary tool for reading Persian poems. Jones translated *The Biography of Nader Shah* by Mirza Mehdi Khan Astarabadi and added some notes regarding the history of Iran and Persian language. He also translated a ghazal by Hafez. Jones' knowledge of Persian language, his numerous popular translations and his lectures on Persian poetry realized his dream as a young Orientalist. He hoped this newly known heritage would provide English poets with a collection of images which later poets would employ and later scholars would explain. This was realized by Romantic poets. Jones was a neoclassic who deemed Ferdowsi the Persian Homer. Unlike Jones and his contemporary scholars, many Romantic poets and poetasters were slightly familiar with Persian language while their interest in Persian literature was noteworthy. Wordsworth's uncle wished the poet would study Oriental languages and Coleridge wished to study at East India. As a result of his familiarity with Persian poetry in general and Hafez in particular, Shelley uses his name as Takhallos (pseudonym) in one of his work. He was introduced to Persian poetry through Jones. His use of rhyme sometimes is similar to that of Persian poets.

By the nineteenth century, Hafez was well-introduced to many English people. In the Romantic period, Hadley and Hindley, Walter Loaf and Richard Le Gallienne, Joseph Champion, John Richardson and John Knot translated Hafez. Gertrude Bell spent many years on translating the Persian poet; the outcome was published in 1897. Longfellow translated Saadi. The Sufic elements in Donne, Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley is under the influence of Persian literature. Walter Savage Landor considered this tendency the guilt of some barbarous taste, but he could not abstain himself from liking Persian literature. His nine poems of Arabic and Persian are evidences of his vulnerability to it. Robert Southey had the same opinion. Although his Christian beliefs were a hindrance in understanding Eastern Muslims, his two works are based on his extensive study of the Orient (Javadi, 2005: 74).Byron considered these works not sellable yet very popular. According to Yohannan Southey's employment of Persian myths is more skillful than that of Ferdowsi (1977: 34). Byron made fun of a poet, Robert Stott because of using "Hafez" as his takhallos. The Romantic poets' use of Persian poetry was often very superficial. The Victorian poets were more meticulous readers and employers of Persian literature.

Matthew Arnold and his interest in Ferdowsi is a good starting point. Arnold had no knowledge of Persian. He was familiar with Ferdowsi's work through a not reliable summary of the story from a book by Sir John Malcolm. Later, he got a better version of the story in the French translation of Ferdowsi by Saint Beauve. In 1832 some parts of *Shahnameh* were translated by Atkinson, a doctor working in India. Arnold, in 1835, used this translation as a basis for an English version of the story in verse. Homeric in tone, this lengthy work is in blank verse. Arnold believed taking advantage of Persian literary heritage can improve the weak English poetry of his own time. Alfred Lord Tennyson was interested in Persian poetry. His study of it started from 1840s and lasted for fifteen years. He spent hours reading Persian texts which harmed his eyesight. The extent of his study of Persian works is a controversial issue. (For more information refer to *Persian Poetry in England and America: A 200—Year History*).

Undoubtedly, Fitzgerald's translation of Khayyam most contributed to the influence of Persian literature on English-speaking people. This work was the most popular in English and formed the basis of a philosophical and social thought which emancipated English middle class from the Victorian constraints. The translation introduced the Persian poet first to the English speaking and then the global audience. This popularity aroused some criticism regarding the immorality of the poems and the threat to the moral values of the Victorian society. T. S. Eliots' reception of Khayyam is interesting. In his youth, he was very interested in it, but in his middle age he was totally against it (D'Ambrosio, 1989). Some words in the translation were either deleted or substituted with Latin equivalents. Some poems by Hafez, the popular poet of the Romantics, were translated in the Victorian period. The moral texts of Saadi were not forgotten and Arbuthnot translated the entire *Gulistan*. Other scholars translated Attar, Rumi and Jami. Nicholson believed knowing Khayyam would not give one a fair picture of Iran. This comment is an evidence of his understanding of Persian culture. The translation of Attar by Davis and Darbandi is a success. It shows the positive influence of Persian scholars in translating Persian works to English. A Scottish priest, William Hastie tried to prove the moral superiority of Rumi to Khayyam through an English adaptation of Rumi based on a German translation. It is worth mentioning that it is Fitzgerald's Khayyam not the Persian one which is more popular than Hafez and Rumi in English-speaking countries. Fitzgerald was highly selective in his choice of poems which led to selecting only the poems advocating drinking and excluding ones regarding regret and repentance. The tradition of drink in Persian literature is very mystical and of course different from the commonsense meaning of the concept. Under the illusion of English literary superiority to the Persians and Oriental nothingness, he once wrote:

It is an amusement to me to take what liberties I like with these Persians who, (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions and who really do want a little Art to shape them (qtd. in Bassnett, 1993: 18).

In The United States

During the American Civil War (1861–1865) writers such as Edgar Allen Poe, (1809 –1849) Nathaniel Hawthorne, (1804–1864) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) turned to Oriental literature in general and Persian literature in particular. Emerson is first introduced to the Persian poets through the German translation of Austrian Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall in 1840 (Irani-Tehrani, 2008). Muslim Persian poets inspire Emerson more deeply than any other group of writers (Fakahani, 1998). He uses them as valuable models for his poetic urges. His most prolific years coincide with the thorough study of these poets. By the early 1840s it seems he has studied them extensively. He writes two essays and two poems dealing with Persian poets and poetry. The most important is the essay entitled "Persian Poetry", which after a quick introduction on the status and importance of poetry in Persia focuses on Hafez as a student of both poetry and theology (Hellal, 1971). He translates several thousand lines from German sources from the Persian poets including Hafez, Sâadi, Attâr, Kermâni, Ferdowsi, Nezâmi, Anvari, Rumi, Halâli and Omar Khayyâm (Ekhtiar, 1976). Yohannan in *Persian Poetry in England and America: A 200—Year History* refers to a genuinely original contribution of American literature to the history of Persian studies in the West through the commitment of Ralph Waldo Emerson to Persian poetry and a great benefaction the contribution has for American literature in turn.

"Only two major poets of the world – Goethe and Tennyson – and one lesser poet –Edward FitzGerald – have responded to Persian poetry with as much excitement, and only the latter has brought that poetry into the mainstream of English and American Literature" (1997: 115).

In August 1863 Emerson publishes a passage in the *Journal of Ralph Waldo Emerson* in which he writes there are new landscapes, new customs, new religions, new manners, that humanity nestles very comfortably at Shiraz [...] and Mecca with moral and intellectual qualities that correspond point by point with those of London and New York (Ekhtiar, 1976). Emerson is so enthralled by Hafez and Saadi that he calls them his "ideal poets" (Obeidat, 1985). Emerson refers to Hafez twenty-five times and Saadi thirty times, the former as frequently as Aristotle or Wordsworth, the latter as Montaigne (Yohannan, 1977: 116). He "hoped to familiarize himself with the way the concepts 'fancy' and 'images' are used by Persian poets, particularly by Hafiz and Saadi, masters of using symbols such as:

roses, parrots, tulips, mosques, dervishes, desert, caravan, robbers, peeps at the harem, slaves, pearls and many others" (Christy qtd. in Ekhtiar, 1976: 49). Persian poetry helps Emerson primarily emancipate his thought from the constriction of convention and supplement the store of imagery by which he gives expression to that thought (Yohannan, 1977: 25).

Some quotations from Emerson reveal the extent of his fascination with Persian poetry:

"The Eastern poetry I looked through, but find Persians still the best by far ... (*Letters IV*, 531). "It would be hard to put more mental and moral philosophy than the Persians have thrown into sentences" (Emerson, 1983: 1123).

During Ralph Waldo Emerson's time, the Orient was not known to Americans, not even to many American scholars. In the preface to the American edition of the *Gulistan*, translated by Francis Gladwin, Emerson asserts: "Whilst the *Journal of the Oriental Society* attests the presence of good Semitic and Sanskrit scholars in our colleges, no translation of an Eastern has yet appeared in America" (qtd. in Ekhtiar, 1976: 10).

Emerson wrote over a thousand lines on Persian poetry; no American literary figure has excelled him in this branch of study and in the evaluation of Persian mysticism (Ekhtiar, 1976).

"The concept of 'joy' or ' intellectual emancipation' in Persian mysticism, which is reflected in "Bacchus," "Days," "Persian Poetry, "and other essays and poems, is one of the aspects in Persian mysticism which impressed Emerson deeply" (Ekhtiar, 1976: 147).

He finds a parallel between his thought, his mystical metaphors and his philosophical patterns and those of Persian mysticism. Vaughan believes that in none of the European languages has mysticism achieved the success that it gained in Persia, but it is noted that Angelus Silesius in the 17th century and R W E in the 19th century also make successful attempts to put mystical thoughts into verse (Ekhtiar, 1976).

Sufism is in fact a form of mystical thought which has in common with other branches of mysticism which believe in: the illusory nature of the physical world; man's forlorn senses in a state of separation from the infallible source of all things. Finally Sufism is involved with poetic symbols such as: the nightingale' autumn, breeze, death, night, day, the vice of the reed, tree, tresses, eyebrow, musk, mole, tavern, wine (Ekhtiar, 1976).

He is unique in the contact with the Persian thought. "He should, therefore, be recognized as the first American representative, philosopher, writer, and a poet who devoted most of the

later part of his life, at least over forty years, to Persian mysticism and to Hafez in particular" (Ekhtiar, 1976: 3).

Persian Poetry, his longest essays, and *Preface to Sadi's Golestan* are his works on Persia. His devoted interest in Persian mysticism manifests itself in his poetry. In a given time and place there should exist some common intellectual background to create a desirable influence in a literary figure. Emerson is no exception. Richardson mentions the significant role of mysticism in Hafez's influence on Emerson. Whereas Quinn believes one should be careful with using mysticism for Emerson, Gay, Christy, Carpenter, Unher and Bano, Scott and Ekhtiar refer to the influence of mysticism, Persian and/or Far Eastern on him. Since Persian mysticism is interwoven with Persian poetry Emerson's interest in Persian poetry can be compared to his interest in Persian Mysticism. Scholars who study Emerson's interest in the East will soon notice the attention that he pays to Persian poets and poetry. He "translated some 700 lines of Persian verse, excluding prose paraphrases" (Yohannan, 1943: 117). He wrote the preface to the Saadi's Gulistan and "Persian Poetry" for the *Atlantic Monthly*, and a poem titled "Saadi," in addition to a fair amount of quotations taken from Ferdowsi, Anwari, Nezami, Mowlana, Saadi, Hafez, Jami and Khayyam.

Some quotations from Emerson reveal the extent of his fascination with Hafez.
"The proudest speech that free-will ever made is in Hafiz' *Divan*" (qtd. in Ekhtiar, 1976: V).

"You defy anybody to have things as good as yours. Hafiz defies you to show him or put him in a condition inopportune & ignoble" (qtd. in Almansour, 2005: 42). In *English Traits* Emerson says of Hafez:

The expressiveness which is the essence of the poetic element, they [the British] have not. It was no Oxonoan, but Hafez, who said, "Let us be crowned with roses, let us drink wine, and break up the tiresome old roof of heaven into new forms (qtd. In Yohannan, 1943: 23). The highest compliment Emerson ever made is paid to Hafez through these lines:

Hafez is characterized by a perfect intellectual emancipation which also he provokes in the reader. Nothing stops him. He is not scared by a name, or a religion. He fears nothing. He sees too far … such is the only man I wish to see and to be (Emerson, 1963: 156).

Richardson mentions to the significant role Sufism plays in Hafez's influence on Emerson. "Hafez's habits of mind were congenial to Emerson in part because Hafez was a Sufi … it was the Sufism of Hafez to which he responded so deeply and so quickly" (Richardson, 1995: 423).
The following part mentions some of the similarities between Emerson and Hafez. The number of lines in which traces of Hafez's thought are found is indicated in parentheses:

"From the Persian of Hafiz" (156)
"From the Persian of Hafiz," Ghazelle (28)
"The Phoenix" (20)
"Faith" (12)
"The Poet" (16)
"The Builder of Heaven" (12)
"Come—the Palace of Heaven" (21)
"By Death of Beds of Roses Drawn" (20)
"Come, Let us Strew Roses" (20)
"Who Gave Thy Cheek" (232)
"The Treacherous wind Pipes a Lewd song" (10)
"Bacchus" (68) (Ekhtiar)

It should be noted that many important long poems, such as "Saadi" (176 lines) have not been included in the list (Ekhtiar, 1976: 142). "As far as we are able to analyze Emerson's poems, at least 64 of them, mainly the longest and the most interesting ones, are influenced by Persian poets. Of these poems close to two-thirds are either attributed to Hafez or their roots can be traced in Hafez's *Divan*" (Ekhtiar, 1976: 142-3). Fakahani believes Emerson's attraction to Hafez and Saadi shaped his poetic theory. Emerson's identification with at least two of the Persian poets is "so close that his very conception of the function of the poet is shaped by their example" (Yohannan, 1943: 127). In his essay "The Poet" Emerson defines the poet as a seer. "Several poets are mentioned, but we know that in several places he is clearly addressing Hafez" (Ekhtiar, 1976: 116). He calls Hafez the "thousand-eyed poet, a nightingale intoxicated with his own music" (qtd. in Ekhtiar, 1976: 116).

Emerson, in a letter to Elizabeth Hoar, writes that "Bacchus" is not a translation from Hafez. Christy finds the source of inspiration in Hafez, especially in the *Sakiname* (Yohannan, 1943). Emerson also translates the poem in "From the Persian of Hafiz, I."
"A general correspondence in thought and expression is apparent in the selected lines from the original— as translated by Emerson—and the imitation" (Yohannan, 1943: 28). In both of the poems the tone is exhilarating, and the language is imperative.
They celebrate wine "seeing in it the power of liberating the mind" (Yohannan, 1943: 28). There are similar words in the poems. "Heaven," "world," "reason," "unlock," "quench(ed)," are used in the two poems.

The similarities between Emerson's "To J. W." and "Ghazelle," his second published translation from Hafez are indicating the influences. Both emphasize on the appeal of enjoying God's grace in this world rather than the afterworld; "are addressed to people extraordinarily indulgent of their piety, but somewhat limited in spiritual vision; and … end on the optimistic note that a favorable deity oversees human affairs." Yohannan also traces "obvious similarities in expression" (Yohannan, 1943: 31). There are also similarities in

manner, subject, and opening passages of "The Sphinx" and his translation from Hafez, "The Phoenix."

Emerson becomes familiar with Hafez through two books of translation by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, one is the collected works of Hafez entitled *Der Diwan Von Mohammed Scheseddin Hafiz* (1812), and the other an anthology of Persian poetry called *Geschichte der Schonen Redekunste Persians* (Fakahani). EvenW. S. Kennedy, who believes there is no poet as Emerson's predecessor, leaves room for his influence from Hafez. The American figure is so fascinated with the Persian poet that the highest compliment he ever made is paid to Hafez. It is Hafez's Sufism, concept of the universal mind, attitude toward the existence of evil, symbolism, spiritual pride, intimacy with nature, nonconformity, poetic theory, and turning back on organized religion and the external forms of worship that influence Emerson.

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Unfortunately, Emerson did not know Persian. He becomes familiar with Hafez through two books of translation by Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, one is the collected works of Hafez entitled *Der Diwan Von Mohammed Scheseddin Hafiz* (1812), and the other an anthology of Persian poetry called *Geschichte der Schonen Redekunste Persians* (Fakahani). More unfortunately, neither did he know German. His assistant, Margaret Fuller helped him with the German version of the original Persian poems. Soon after its publication, the precision of Hammer's translation was brought under question by other German orientalists including Johann Gottfried Kosegarten and Heinrich Friedrich von Diez (Shareghi qtd. In Kalatehseifary, 2009: 1). Although the German translation remains faithful to Hafez regarding the semantic features of the original poems, there are some points of weakness (Kalatehseifary, 2009: 83). One instance of the translation's deviation and deficiency regarding the semantic features of Hafez is the mistreatment of the word "rend."

This is one of the key concepts in the Persian poems, hence the translation's weakness in explaining the word to the audience can be considered as a fundamental mistake of the translation. Due to the lack of any appropriate German equivalent for the Persian "rend," the translation substitutes the word with some vocabulary in the field of drinking.

Conclusion

A close Study of the reception of Persian poetry in Anglophone world in general and in Britain and The United States in particular reveals that while Persian literature is introduced and taught in these countries, it is still far from being truly known there. Those

who have been familiar with Persian literature have mainly known it through translations by western scholars, and this has led to problems and misconceptions. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, the orient is never truly depicted by the west. The same may apply to Persian literature. One may ask what makes Khayyam more popular in some English speaking countries and Hafiz, Sa'di and Rumi in some others. While it is technically agreed that native speakers of a language are better translators into that language, yet it cannot be denied that western scholars' unfamiliarity with Persian culture makes their translations less reliable. Thus the best way would be to have Persian scholars of English literature translate Persian works into English. Collaborating with English-speaking scholars also would prove useful. The translation of Attar by Davis and Darbandi is an evidence supporting the usefulness of the collaboration. Deeply familiar with Persian language and culture, Persian scholars of English literature would be more successful in introducing subtleties of Persian culture and literature to the world.

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