

Review

The Persian Novel: Ideology, Fiction, and Form in the Periphery, Omid Azadibougar, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014, ISBN 978-90-420-3884-4 (pbk), 241 pp.

The Persian Novel by Omid Azadibougar asks a rather simple question, the answer to which is overdue yet by no means simple: why has the Persian novel not enjoyed the same global recognition as Iranian cinema has in the past century? What is wrong with the Persian novel? These questions are the point of departure for the study. Azadibougar ascribes the problem to the lack of a full-fledged, scientific discipline of literary studies; the sociocultural crisis that Iran is grappling with; or perhaps the literary amateurism that prevents the genre evolving into a “knowledge producing institution” (p. 2).

The Persian Novel is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 establishes a framework based on the observation that the literary form is symptomatic of ideological propensities or epistemological shifts. After having noted that modern Persian literature is overlooked both inside and outside Iran and that Persian fiction existed before the novel, Azadibougar briefly points to the philosophical transformations and epistemological upheavals that underlay the formation of the plot in the eighteenth century British novel. He points to the material conditions and developments in philosophy of science that made inevitable the birth of the novel, within which “linear causation” of events (p. 26) and reliance on facts and commonalities (rather than divine intervention) (pp. 25–6) were marked generic departures.

The theoretical framework in Chapter 1 is based on a core/periphery model to illustrate the relation between western Europe and the rest of the world; the former is considered the core, the birthplace of the novel, and the latter the periphery, the context into which the novelistic is imported or transplanted through imitation or translation. In the case of Iran, as part of the periphery, the dominant Islamic ideology rapaciously lays claim to knowledge and the truth based on its arrogant presumption of completeness and absolutism and the “primordial supremacy of the Koran.” The Persian novel is thus marginalized into a mere ornament that offers only variations of “the Grand Koranic narrative” (p. 28). As such, the Persian novel, Azadibougar argues, loses its “critical edge,” is rendered incapable of challenging absolute truths, and risks turning into “the new dogma ... its own anti-thesis” (p. 28). Although Iranian society is not an ideological monolith, and other voices, however faint, reach the ears of the public every now and then, Azadibougar’s characterization of the Persian novel holds true when we take into account the extremely draconian system that governs all cultural, philosophical, and political knowledge production in Iran.

Chapter 2 compares the novelistic with the classical fictional form, *Hekayat*. The author notes that, as the equivalent of *Hekayat*, the nineteenth-century European novel is lengthier, for it does not lead to “a persuasive destination, a moral”; rather, it has to continue to describe, in detail, social conflicts and movements (p. 34). Azadibougar provides two highly creative readings of *Hekayat*, one by Sa’adi and the other by Rumi to illuminate this comparative argument.

With the understanding that the novel in Persian is influenced by its European counterpart, Chapter 3 examines “the problem of imitation” (p. 6). Firstly, anything new in the Persian context has already been accomplished in the European context. However, when pondering spheres of literary influence and borrowing, Azadibougar admonishes that literary interference should always be taken into account and creativity should not be considered deficient. Azadibougar wonders whether, if the Persian novel does not meet the criteria stipulated by theory of the novel, that ought to be regarded as a shortcoming of the Persian novel or an inadequacy of literary theory itself? And as we read along, we slowly arrive at the realization that the question is rather rhetorical, posed to reveal the dialectical relationship between literary theory and production in the periphery, where theory too is imported from the core.

Azadibougar adds, however, that this uneven relationship does not entirely account for the predicament of the Persian novel. Within the same uneven playing field, Iranian cinema has been able to assert itself. Why has the Persian novel not been successful then? To answer this question, Azadibougar proposes three “framing principles,” namely, the reiterative, the associative, and the evaluative (p. 62). He argues that the Persian novel can subversively reconstruct the European form while mimicking it; in this way, the reiterated form that is otherwise insignificant can become culturally pertinent if the author of a Persian novel represents their reality as lived experience worthy of attention beyond the confines of formal imitation (p. 66). The associative in this analysis concerns the impact of extra-literary forms—material conditions and language—on various aspects of the work of literature (p. 67). Here,

Azadibougar places particular emphasis on form, contending that without it, literature would be reduced to the historical, the aesthetic, or the ideological. Thus, politics and aesthetics should both be present in a work of literature and constantly negotiate their share therein. Finally, the evaluative is defined as “the set of criteria applied to literature by prioritizing certain values and leads to the canonization of literature by preferring some products over others” (p. 68). Here, the main hurdle is identified as the incongruence between the imported theory, utilized to critique the Persian novel and the novelistic, which is embedded in an Iranian context. Azadibougar posits that if transferred through translation or imitation, the ideas that are associated with the novel are out of place in the Iranian reality, and if European novels or the ideas that accompany them enjoy circulation in Iran, as a peripheral context, it does not necessarily imply their assimilation into the new reality. He adds, nevertheless, that the foregrounding of differences, which stems from postcolonial considerations, should not be accompanied by ignorance of the similarities between literatures of the core and periphery, as those similarities are highly significant in comparative studies.

Azadibougar’s dichotomy of progressive/nativist thinkers in Iran is based on a stereotypical framing, especially when he places Shariati and Al-e Ahmad in the nativist camp. In fact, it seems that his taxonomy here is antithetical to what *The Persian Novel* calls for, namely, a Third Way that would transcend these musty binaries of tradition/modernity, East/West, and Progressive/Nativist.

Chapter 4 identifies the “contextual variables” that influence literary production in Iran. Azadibougar observes a highly significant vicious cycle that mars the recognition of the Persian novel as world literature: if a novel is a mere imitation of its “Western” counterparts, then it is, at best, a masterful yet unoriginal copy in terms of “formal finesse.” On the other hand, if a novel departs from western evaluative modes and metrics, then it will be marked as non-literature. In both cases, the Persian novel is akin to a “peripheral counterpart,” a shipwreck landing on the island where Robinson Crusoe is already settled, where the area has already been “chartered and territorialized” (p. 79). However, one point that seems to be an oversimplification is the binary of capitalist/non-capitalist context, where the author seems to suggest that the novel in the West is invariably measured by the metrics of capitalist progress while the Persian counterpart is not. It is unclear why Azadibougar seems to imply that the profit motive does not influence literary production in Iran. The profit motive directly influences decisions on the number of copies and reprints, which determine how widely available, and hence visible, a work will be.

Azadibougar notes that the Persian novel’s “critical dependence” on other, more canonical novelistic traditions is due to three main factors:

- a) it is dependent on European traditions and has not developed its own germane topics and questions yet; b) it has not yet departed from extra-literary discourses of history, politics and various ideological orientations; c) it struggles against and is

subjected to pre-existing and influential non-novelistic classical conceptions of literariness. (p. 82)

He therefore suggests that, in order to produce an indigenous Persian novel, one that is embedded in the Iranian socioeconomic context and not a mere imitation of the European, the task of literary criticism in Iran is to develop “an awareness of the unintentional parodic effect of forms in their various manifestations and, at the same time, a meta-critical re-evaluation of the critical discourse produced about novels in Persian” (p. 93). Accomplishing this task, he notes, requires a comparative perspective, which would include knowledge of the original form and the context into which it is imported (p. 99).

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on Sadegh Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl* and attempt to identify the facets of its international recognition. Azadibougar draws attention to the numerous critical studies that attempt to trace the elements of the novel back to Hedayat’s psyche and pathologize the novel. He, however, suggests that *The Blind Owl* should be treated, first and foremost, as a “discourse,” which implies “engaging the philosophy of literature in modern Iran” (p. 109). He therefore attempts to evaluate the influence of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Ligeia” on *The Blind Owl*, to prove that the relation is not as linear as some scholars would suggest. There are many valuable insights into *The Blind Owl*, especially in Chapter 6, where Azadibougar successfully argues that the narrator of *The Blind Owl* is fallible; hence, his account of the events (for example his claim to knowing the ethereal woman’s name) are most probably false.

Chapter 7 offers a review of literature of the various historical accounts of the development of the Persian novel; it points to the lack of attention to the generic in these historical accounts and the emphasis of sociopolitical drivers that are used as milestones in the history of the genre in Iran. Azadibougar suggests that the history of the Persian novel does not have to be conceptualized under the shadow of the European or as a mimetic practice of it. Instead, he calls for a new history that “that is aware of the significance of genre and can at least justify forms and the functions they carry out in the culture” (p. 158).

For the rest of Chapters 7 and 8, Azadibougar offers brilliant and highly creative readings of *Women without Men* by Shahrnush Parsipur and *I Will Put Out the Lights* by Zoya Pirzad. He ends Chapter 8 with the observation that Pirzad’s novel successfully overcomes the three hurdles in the way of the international recognition “of the Persian novel: the non-literary, the classical, and the European” (p. 200). As is noted in the first two chapters, to this list can be added a fourth: a lack of innovative and rigorous criticism, able to reveal the normally undiscovered aspects of influential novelistic works in Persian. This is a lack that *The Persian Novel* has successfully helped fill.

Overall, *The Persian Novel* is Azadibougar’s contribution to the future development of a scientific, systematized, and institutionalized apparatus of knowledge production in Iran with regard to literary production in general and the Persian novel in particu-


lar. By the same token, Azadibougar's own study is an attempt at first defining the Persian novel formalistically, identifying the hurdles on its path to international recognition, and then examining works that, in his view, have overcome those obstacles.

During a second reading, it becomes evident that the line of argument has been well planned, with scholarly calm and refreshing philosophical insight. Nevertheless, one issue that might repeatedly cross the reader's mind through the first four chapters is that the in-depth engagement with theory is rarely accompanied by references to specific examples from the history of the novel in Iran, which makes the initial painstaking delineation of the contours of that which constitutes the "Persian" in the study of the Persian novel rather moot, as the theory can be applied to many novelistic traditions that have bloomed in the shadow of the European. Although his highly abstract arguments seem to be compelling and well-informed by that history, the lack of concrete examples prevent the project from reaching its full potential as the clear-headed and ground-breaking analysis that it is. Despite that fact, *The Persian Novel* should be recognized as a milestone in Persian literary theory, one that will inform and enrich future studies for many years to come.

Azadibougar has successfully avoided the reductionist tendencies that are widespread in the discipline, and "whose main objective is not literature at all" (p. 204) but approaching the literary from a sociopolitical point of view and ignoring the delicacies of form. He has not only offered a new theoretical vision of what literary criticism in Iran should look like but has also helped realize that vision in *The Persian Novel*.

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