

Development of Persian Prose in the Newspapers During Iranian Constitutional Revolution (Case Study: Sur-E-Esrafil)

Saeedeh Birjandi, PhD

Iranian University Students' Organization for Qur'anic Activities,
Iran, Tehran

Abstract

Newspapers have played a great role in all aspects of people's lives, especially in literary aspects since they have been created. The literary aspect has been affected by newspapers in terms of both forms and contents. As long as Persian literature is concerned, newspapers have been influential either in prose or poetry. Literary development has also taken place in Persian literature especially newspapers, which have been used to reflect people's lives, speak about freedom, independence, patriotism and decolonization, and helped appear new themes and terminologies.

There were well-known newspapers such as "*sur-e-Esrafil*" and "*Nasim-e-Shomal*" which played active roles in creating Persian literary development. In this research, we will study development in Persian prose, which have occurred under the influence of newspapers, in this case Sur-e-Esrafil.

Keywords: Newspaper, prose, Persian literature, Iranian Constitutional Revolution.

Introduction

Persian literature during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution manifested in the form of poetry and in newspapers' articles. The Constitutional Revolution is one of the most important events in Iran, which affected all aspects of the society. In light of the revolution, people's point of views towards life changed and they became aware that their rights had been violated. So they demanded their rights be heeded, calling for freedom and independence from foreign countries. Moreover, during that time a great number of writers, scholars and thinkers emerged as directors of the revolution, as they used newspapers to disseminate their ideas. The Persian literature saw certain developments, affected by some factors including newspapers that were published abroad. This research tries to evaluate the development of the Persian prose, under the influence of newspapers

especially *Sur-e-Esrafil* during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. The research also tries to explain how newspapers brought changes in Persian prose, and introduces those changes. Therefore, we will answer these questions: what are the impacts of newspapers (*Sur-e-Esrafil*) on the Persian prose during that time? And what are these changes?

This subject has not been discussed previously by any writers as an independent book or article.

Persian literature during Iranian Constitutional Revolution

All literary activities that were carried out either in the form of prose or poetry from the Revolution until the 28th Mordad coup constitute Persian literature during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. The literature during the aforementioned time depicts public efforts to replace that time's dictatorship with a republic government. (Agand, 1984, P.334) literature was often emerged in newspapers because of two main reasons, first due to a rise in the number of newspapers after the revolution and the second was a growing tendency among people towards newspapers. (Kamshad, 2005, P.64) therefore, newspapers played an active role in enlightening public thoughts, as they covered all aspects of people's lives and helped reduced the gap between people and the government. In addition, newspapers made the language expand. (Tabatabaee, 1996, P.211)

History of Persian newspapers

In Europe, newspapers emerged in early seventeenth century, and in Iran they emerged during the reign of *Mohammad Shah Qajar*. The first Iranian newspaper, *Kaghaz-e Akhbar*, was launched by *Mirza Saleh Shirazi* in 1837. (Khatami, 1995, P.89)

The first part represents the first decade of *Nasir al-Din Shah's* reign (1848-1896).

From this period *Roznameh "Vaqay' Ittefaqeyyeh"* was founded in 1851, and survived under different titles. (Sabur, 1984, V. 1, P.138) it was a well-known and famous paper which covered the *Qajar* government's activities as well as many social, cultural and political issues for a long period of time. A great number of newspapers appeared during the Persian Constitutional Revolution period. However, "*Sur-e-Esrafil*" and "*Nasim-e-Shomal*" were the most popular ones. (P.143)

Sur-e-Esrafil:

Sur-e-Esrafil was an internal, private, independent, and revolutionary newspaper which was founded in 1907. The first 32 issues were published by the founder of the journal, *Mirza Jahangir Khan* (1870-1908), an Iranian author and journalist. Its literary satirical elements were the main reason for its popularity. *Ali Akbar Dehkhoda* (1879-1956) was the writer of satirical

articles of the column “*Charand-o Parand*“ („Nonsense“), whose articles offered services to the society as well as Persian literature.

But, *Sur-e-Esrafil* was suspended as part of a crackdown under *Mohammad Ali Shah* who sent Dehkhoda and some other liberalists into exile in Europe. Dehkhoda continued to publish the newspaper. “*Dekho*” was his famous signature and pen name. Dehkhoda had a simple linguistic style in contrast to the rather literary style addressing educated people. In this way, he sought to address the majority of the population as well as daily problems of ordinary people. Dehkhoda’s new style affected Persian journalism and literature especially the prose. (Dowlatabadi, 1954, P.47)

Dehkhoda’s satire was really modern; not only it was critical of the then establishment but also did prepare ground for social realism, both in poetry and prose. His new style helped Persian writing get rid of stultifying diction of former times. (Kamshad, 2005, P.38) *Sur-e-Esrafil* applied simple prose, because it addressed all people including literate and illiterate individuals. It created a new literary genre, using simple and understandable sentences in a satirical style. It was also full of proverbs and slang words. (Ardalani, 2000, P.107)

Persian prose development under *Sur-e-Esrafil* influence

We will examine the development that occurred in Persian prose under the influence of *Sur-e-Esrafil* at that time. Those developments include the literary use of slang words, the simplification of prose, the use of new idioms and words, the emergence of novels as well as contents and ideas in the Persian literature.

Newspapers and Persian prose after Iranian Constitutional Revolution:

Journalism brought big changes to the Persian prose, making it simple and clear while turning it into a tool to serve the public. Dehkhoda’s articles, in particular, played a significant role, as they helped found a new school of thought in Persian prose. (Khatami, 1995, P.101-102) some literary historians consider Dehkhoda’s articles as the beginning of the modern fiction. (Agand, 1984, P.343 – 344) therefore, journalism and Dehkhoda’s articles are regarded as the two basic factors behind the development of the Persian prose. (Dowlatabadi, 1954, P.46)

Newspapers and slang:

In early years of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, since journalists were trying to convey news as fast as possible, they sometimes did not translate European idioms or they were not able to find appropriate equivalents for some foreign words and idioms. Therefore, many new words entered Persian language (Yasemi, 1973, P.117), with people beginning to

use them in daily conversations. This made the Persian language develop and opened new horizons. (Tabatabaee, 1996, P.206-207) Such words and terms were also used in Sur-e-Esrafil, for example the word "censure⁹⁹": "I wish God wiped out the ominous word of "censure¹⁰⁰". (Y.2, N.1, P. 5) as we see, this French word is used without translation. Or the English word "Contract" that has appeared in this journal: "If they want to benefit from the contract that will be closed without permission by a ruler or mojtahed¹⁰¹." (N. 2, P. 2) or the word "Commission":

"O holy board of the Financial Commission ..." (p. 9) In the above-mentioned texts, the words "censorship, contract and commission" are used in their original forms, not in their Persian equivalents. In this way, they entered the Persian language. Many literary critics believe that the press are the main factor in the development of prose because of their relation with people and addressing all segments of the society. People read newspapers every day and use their sentences and words in their conversations, even if what the newspapers use are wrong. At the same time, most journalists pay more attention to political and economic news than grammatical rules and language. That's why we sometimes find errors in grammar used by newspapers. (Khatami, 1995, P.100-101)

Dekhoda's articles named "*Charad-o-Parand*" caused many changes in the Persian prose. The articles had a new style thanks to the use of slangy words and idioms. Here are some examples of the slangy idioms that appeared in "*Charad-o-Parand*":

"God bless all the dead. When he wanted to start his preachment, first prepared the audience with a very long proem...he was saying that in this way, the subject become more understandable.¹⁰²" (P. 9)

Dekhoda wrote in his articles that:

"Although I am bothering you, I have no choice. Man likes to talk, silence makes his heart heavy...¹⁰³" (P. 7)

3. Simplicity in literary writing:

Before the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, Persian prose was used for writing various types of rhetorical arts and served courts and

99 Censorship

100 «این لفظ منحوس فرنگی سانسور را از صفحه این خاک بر اندازد.»

101 «در صورتیکه از این کنترات طبیعی که بی حکم حاکم و بی اجازه مجتهد بسته شده بخوانند منتفع شوند...»

102 می‌گفت. وقتی که می‌رفت روضه بخواند اول یک مقدمه دور و درازی می‌چید.....«خدا رفتگان همه را بیامرزد مطلب اینطور خر فهم‌تر می‌شود.»

103 «اگر چه درد سر می‌دهم. اما چه می‌توان کرد نشخوار آدمیزاد حرف است. آدم حرف هم که نزند دلش می‌پوسد...»

governments. But the prose began to change to be understandable under the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah. And after the revolution, this process became faster and faster because of an increase in publication of newspapers, the importance of quickly disseminating news and distributing newspapers, as well as the lack of a focus on literary aspects.

Subsequently, journalists had no time to edit news items, and therefore wrote their items using simple and understandable sentences. As a result, a new style emerged in Persian prose. (Katebi, P. 103 – 104) Let us see an example of simple prose:

“Obviously, there is no wise and pious man against the establishment of parliament which is to publish justice and religious laws.¹⁰⁴” (Sur-e-Esrafile, 1907, N. 6, P. 1)

4. Social satire:

Satire is a technique applied by writers to expose and criticize foolishness and corruption of an individual or a society by using humor, irony, exaggeration or ridicule. Satire has been existing in Persian literature. But, prior to the revolution, it was not used to address social issues (Kamshad, 2005, P.67), because literature was used to serve the government and writers were afraid of criticizing authorities. However, after the revolution, a kind of satire was used to serve the society, which is called “*social satire*”. This genre appeared in the prose under the influence of Sur-e-Esrafil articles written by Dehkhoda. Therefore, we consider him as a leading writer of satirical prose, while *Nasim-e-Shomal* is regarded as a key satirical poem. (Arian Pour, 2000. V.2, P. 36-39) Both used satire as a tool to improve their society. (Kamshad, 2005. P.67) Let us see an example of Dehkhoda’s social satire:

“Maybe you aim to write that some of our clerics have stopped selling endowed properties and started selling the country¹⁰⁵....” (N. 5, P. 7)

Dehkhoda laments the treason by some clerics.

5. Emergence of new contents in Persian literature:

Some new contents and thoughts appeared in the Persian literature since the Revolution, including in political and social fields. Consequently, new subjects entered literature for the first time, such as homeland and patriotism, freedom and independence from foreign countries as well as equality and people's rights. Newspapers affected the emergence of these new contents in the Persian literature because of their local and international

باشد هیچ عاقلی و دین داری نمی‌گوید لازم... معلوم است تاسیس مجلس که سبب نشر عدالت و احکام شریعت 104 نیست

تو بلکه خواستی بنویسی بعضی از ملاحی ما حالا دیگر از فروختن موقوفات دست بر داشته به فروش مملکت 105 اند...» دست گذاشته

news items as well as their translated stories. (Farzad, 1969, P.27 – 28) Iranian newspapers joined the intellectual movement propagators after the Revolution. Therefore, a great number of articles in various modern and intellectual subjects appeared in newspapers either in poetry or in prose. (Tabatabaee, 1996, P. 206 – 207) We study some of these new contents and subjects:

I. Homeland and patriotism: This subject was unprecedented in the Persian literature before the Constitutional Revolution. (Shafiee Kadkani, 2001, P. 2) And after the Revolution, newspapers dealt with it. Let us see a simple example of using these two contents in *Sur-e-Esrafil*:

“Thank God, we Iranians finally realized our humbleness and understand that neither enemies nor friends are allowed to oppress us. So, we will lift our country to have a Parliament and constitution with a bravely movement. And maybe we can serve our religion, government, homeland and finally our nation.¹⁰⁶” (N. 1, P. 1)

II. Freedom, independence from foreigners and people's rights:

Freedom in its western meaning or democracy, as well as freedom of opinion and expression became popular since the Revolution. This idiom used to have the meaning of the release from prison. (Shafiee Kadkani, 2001, P.35)

This theme was used in newspapers of that era. Here is a simple example of using this idiom in *Sur-e-Esrafil*: “We announce loudly that we are not afraid of the threat and the death. And we do not want to live without freedom, equality and honor¹⁰⁷.” (P.36)

The above-mentioned text shows that people at that time were partly aware of their rights, so they were beginning to demand them. We see in this journal an article that has argued about people's rights and it seems that this subject was something new for Iranians:

“A bunch of poor people are waiting for Gabriel's falling down to allow them to be humans to achieve their rights. Or they are waiting until that king signs or that mojtahid allows them to achieve their rights¹⁰⁸” (N.2, P. 1)

«حمد خدای را که ما ایرانیان ذلت و رقیت خود را احساس کرده و دانستیم که تا قیامت بارکش خویش و بیگانه شاید.. نخواهیم بود. لهذا با یک جنبش مردانه مملکت خود را مشروطه و دارای مجلس شورای ملی (پارلمان) نموده. بتوانیم به دین و دولت و وطن و ملت خود خدمتی کنیم.»

با صدای رسا می‌گوییم که از تهدید و هلاک بیم و خوف نداریم و به زندگی بدون حریت و مساوات و شرف¹⁰⁷ و قعی نمی‌گذاریم.»

«یک مشت مردم بدبخت ایران برای اینکه آدم باشند و استیفای حقوق آدمیت کنند منتظرند مجددا جبرئیل از آسمان نازل شود. فلان مجتهد اجازه بدهد و فلان پادشاه امضا نماید.»

The author of the above text, **Mirza Jahan Gir Khan**, complains that people do not know their rights.

III. Socail subjects:

Before the Revolution, Persian literature was used to serve the government and the kings Court. But it changed to serve the public, finding its new great goal which was to serve people and to improve the country. So, literature has acted as a mirror that reflects various national subjects. Newspapers reflected living conditions of people for the first time. For example, *Sur-e-Esrafil* dealt with community issues. Let us see an article about poverty and poor people:

“We hope to be resolute to achieve the constitution and to defend the parliament and to help the poor, villagers and oppressed people¹⁰⁹.” (P.1)

“Iranian people pretend to be totally unaware and in the dark. So, they do not want to understand their awful situation. Some people know the business slowdown, the Military weakness and the standstill of our literature¹¹⁰...” (N: 7 -8, P. 6)

This journal complained about lack of attention to people’s problems, hoping that people would become aware to try to develop their homeland.

IV. Decolonization and anti-autocracy campaign:

Sur-e-Esrafil deals with these subjects and it encourages people to pay attention to them. Here is a mentioned example:

“We should oppose tyrants with our work, our souls and languages¹¹¹.” (N.3, P. 5)

Moreover, this journal has some articles about foreign interference in internal affairs of the country:

“Nowadays, Europeans have infiltrated into the country and they come in groups. One comes under the pretext of trade and plunders our properties and makes us needy. After that another comes under the pretext of tourism then tries to discover the secrets of our country. The main aim of all is to weaken our country¹¹²”. (P.5)

Results

«در تکمیل معنی مشروطیت و حمایت مجلس شورای ملی و معاونت روستاییان و ضعفا و فقرا و مظلومین 109 امیدواریم تا آخرین نفس ثابت قدم باشیم.»
«ملت ما مثل کبک سر در برف کرده و نمی‌خواهد حال پریشانی خود را ببیند. بعضی هم هستند که به تنزل و 110 خرابی تجارت ملت خود معترفند. ضعف قوه حربیه و سیاسیه را قائلند و می‌دانند که ادبیات ما خیلی عقب رفته...»
«با مستبیدین از دل و جان و کلک و زبان بجنگیم.» 111
«امروز اروپاییان بر ممالک رخنه کرده و گروه گروه همی آیند یکی به اسم تجارت، اموال ما را از کفمان 112 مقصود عمده و ... می‌رباید و ما را به خود محتاج می‌کند. دیگری به عنوان سیاحت اسرار مملکتی ما را کشف کرده غرض اصلی همه خوردن ممالک ما مسلمانان است.»

Newspapers have had a major impact on the development of the society. They have shaped civilizations, changed political systems and spoke out against injustice. Newspapers gave people a detailed preview of human experiences, allowing them to connect on basic levels of desire and emotion. The potential impact of newspapers is unquestionable.

Persian newspapers during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution were effective in forming public opinion. The impact of newspapers on freedom, either by the use of poetry or prose, is undeniable. The new Persian prose was formed under different factors including the role of Persian Press that were published abroad. The development occurred in the Persian prose under the influence of newspapers as follows:

- The prose became simple and understandable.
- It avoided using complexity and rhetorical arts.
- The satirical prose emerged under the influence of Dekhoda's articles that served the society.
- Some new subjects and contents emerged in the Persian prose since that time like: decolonization and anti-autocracy campaign, social subjects, homeland and patriotism, the awful situation of poor people and the general situation of the country, freedom and equality.
- The entrance of foreign words and idioms.
- *Sur-e-Esrafil* is considered as the beginning of various developments in Persian prose, including the emergence of Persian fiction and social satire, use of slang words, simplification of the prose, use of proverbs in prose and the entrance of new idioms and words.

References:

- Agand, Y. (1984). The Modern literature of Iran. Tehran.
- Ardalani, E. (2000). Periods of Persian prose during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. Sanandag: Giyar press.
- Arian Pour, Y. (2000). Az Saba ta Nima. Tehran: Zavvar press.
- Dowlat Abadi, A. (1954). The history of Persian prose development. Tabriz: Farhang press.
- Farzad, M. (1969). Major Schools in Iranian literature. Tehran: Sokhan.
- Kamshad, H. (2005). The founders of modern Persian prose. Tehran: Ney press.
- Katebi, H. Brief history of Persian prose. Tehran: Shafagh.
- Khatami, A. (1995). Studying the poetry and prose. Tehran: Paya press.
- Sabur, D. (1948). Meeting with contemporary Persian prose. Tehran: Shafagh press.

Shafiee Kadkani, M. (2001). *Periods of Persian prose from the Iranian Constitutional Revolution period until the fall of the monarchy*. Tehran: Sokhan.

Tabatabaee, M. (1996). *Analytical history of the press in Iran*. Tehran: Besat.

The Journal of Sur-e-Esrafil. (1907). (3 numbers in 1 volume)

Yasemi, R. (1973). *Iranian Modern Literature*. Tehran: Ibn-e-Sins.