

Literature of Iran

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The oldest extant Persian writing is found in Persian inscriptions, but it is only of historical interest. The first major literary works are the scriptures of Zoroastrianism and the Pahlavi writing of Parthian and Sassanian Iran, when there was certainly an active literary life. But all that we know of it consists of a few indirect references and some brief works in Middle Persian or Pahlavi which were preserved, along with religious books, in the Zoroastrian communities, collections of maxims, a historical romance.

Poetry was cultivated by minstrels. The names of some of these poet musicians have come down to us, like Barbod, the favorite of Khosrow Parviz; but their work was never written down and has been lost. Fragments of Manichaean religious poetry has been recorded from the sand by archaeologists and are of such high quality that they may be assumed to belong to a well-established tradition. Some of these are to be found as far away as in China today.

The Arab Conquest (7th century AD) made Arabic the literary language and Islam the dominant literary theme. Many notable works of Arabic literature are by Persians. Persian

re-emerged as the literary language in the 9th century AD, and in the following centuries-classical Persian literature flowered.

This literature is undoubtedly the most brilliant expression of the Iranian genius. While there are also interesting works in prose, it is poetry — the most varied in the Islamic world — that gives Iranian literature special value. Cherished over a period of more than 10 centuries, it was enjoyed and imitated well beyond the confines of the Iranian Plateau: in Asia Minor, in Central Asia and in the Muslim communities of India. The literature of Turkey and India developed under its influence.

Of the early known poets one should count Rudaki, who was blind, and Daqiqi. Of Rudaki's poems dating 940 AD, few remain to this day though he is reputed to have written several thousand. Daqiqi was an epic poet, commissioned to write the original Shahnameh (The Book of Kings), the national epic. It took him about thirty years to compose 60,000 couplets of the Shahnameh which gives the history of Iran to the end of the Sassanian period.

He is said to have been promised a gold coin for every couplet of his Shahnameh by the reigning court. However, when he completed the monumental work in 999 AD, the reigning monarch, Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi, was staggered by the size of it and instead offered him a silver coin for each couplet. Ferdowsi turned down the offer and returned to Tus, brokenhearted, where he composed a sharp satire against the Sultan. He died penniless, but his Shahnameh lives forever in the heart of every Iranian.

Sultan

Mahmud is reputed to have had four hundred poets attached to his court. These included many poets who were great in their own right: Onsoni, Farrokhi, Manuchehri, Asadi, etc, al-Biruni, who wrote The Chronicle of Ancient Nations, was also at his court.

Classical

Persian literature has developed under two powerful patronages: royal and religious. Though existing fragments of Persian verse are dated by experts as early as the 8th century AD, the known history of Persian literature begins in the 9th century, with the beginning of the decline of the caliphs at Baghdad. At that time, local royal dynasties were rising in Iran and increasingly asserting their independence of the caliphs. The resulting dynasties established their own courts and patronized poets and scholars. It was in Bokhara, at the Samanid court, that Avicenna improved on the medicine and philosophy of ancient Greece. Until two centuries ago his treatises and books were used as textbooks in some schools of medicine in Europe. He is said to have started writing his encyclopedia when only eight years old.

Prose

— tales, fables, allegories, and philosophical and scientific works — also flourished. The most outstanding prose works were histories: many of these surpassed their Arabic models.

The Seljuk period stands out in the history of Iranian literature – a period rich in both verse and prose. The latter included such outstanding books as Ghazali’s Revivification of Religious Sciences and its Persian summary The Alchemy of Happiness; Bayhaqi’s History of the Ghaznavids, Nezam ol-Molk’s Book of Government and Kaykavus’s Book of Qabus; the fables of Kalikeh va Demneh and Nezami Aruzi’s Four Discourses. All of these are still considered masterpieces of Persian prose.

In a class by himself was Nasser Khosrow, a poet and great scholar whose travel books are among the seven or eight of his fifteen works in prose and some of 30,000 verses that still survive. His best known book is his Travelogue to Egypt. Nasser Khosrow’s poems are mainly lengthy odes on religious and ethical subjects. Some Iranian scholars believe that Nasser Khosrow should join the six in the Iranian Hall of Fame of outstanding poet – Ferdowsi, Khayyam, Anvari, Mowlavi, Sa’di and Hafez.

Ommar Khayyam (11th century AD), both a poet and a mathematician, while combining two opposite attributes, crafted his well-known Rubaiyat. Also among the great poets are the poets of sufism: Farid ad-Din Attar and Jalal od-Din Rumi.

In addition, the Seljuk period can boast of other giants in literature, such as Onori, Abu Sa’eed, Baba Taher, Mas’ud Sa’d Salman, Gorgani and Sana’ei. Mo’ezzi, Anvari and Khaqani are masters of Persian poetry of the more sophisticated style which is

impossible to translate. Hence, they remain relatively unknown outside the country.

After

the 15th century Persian literature went into a decline that lasted until the 19th century. In the 20th century, Western influence and the struggle for independence and social justice in Iran made political and social themes paramount, and literary language became simple and direct. Modern poets include Iraj Mirza, Aref Pishavari, Malak osh-Sho-ara Bahar, Hushang Ebtehaj, Parvin E’tessaami, Nima Ushij, Ahmad Shamlu, Mehdi Akhavan Saales, Forough Farrokhzad, and Sohrab –e Sepehri. Saadegh Hedayat, Jamalzadeh, Dowlat Abadi, Darvishian, Ali-Mohammad Afghani, and Jamal Mir Saadeghi are the country’s celebrated novelists in modern times.