

INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that many of the world's greatest novels have been translated into Persian, and even though the Persian novelistic tradition claims its masters, there is no significant trace of Persian novels in the international literary market or critical discussions. In fact, what dismays an Iranian student of literature is that no Iranian novelist has ever been awarded a significant international literary prize and that, except in orientalist communities, Iranian novelists are almost absolutely unknown in the world.

The delayed globalization of this novelistic tradition can be evidenced by a look at any of the anthologies of World Literature: despite more than a century of the genre's production in Persian, it is still classical Persian literature that represents Iran. In order to understand what a global presence would mean, it is not even necessary to go beyond national boundaries. Comparing the status of the Persian novel with Iranian cinema, both nationally and internationally, reveals aspects of the problem: Iranian cinema has had commercial success at home and has won critical respect abroad; Iranian novels, however, lack both.

There seems to be something wrong with the Persian novel, something which is quite ubiquitous, but pretty vague – it is felt but evades articulation. Many of the novels that are produced in Persian seem to fail to meet the readers' literary expectations and leave them with a sense of dissatisfaction. At the same time, translated novels have a more vibrant market than original ones and foreign masters of the genre enjoy better fame and command higher respect than most Persian novelists. The question that has been asked constantly in the past decades is what delays the globalization of Persian novels: is the problem textual and in the quality of works, is it extra-textual and in the networks that contribute to the globalization of a novelistic tradition, or is it a combination of these two factors? Whatever the causes, what are the solutions?

In spite of its urgency for literary studies in Iran, the issue has never been substantially and adequately addressed: neither those who

assert a high literary quality for Persian novels nor those who argue the reverse have ever articulated their arguments clearly to explain what they mean by literary quality or to justify their evaluative criteria. Similarly, those who blame local political conditions or the global asymmetrical cultural structures always fail to answer why, for instance, Iranian cinema has been able to capitalize on its successes to emerge as a distinct and respectable cinematic tradition in the world, but modern Iranian literature has not been able to keep pace.

What is common to all critical attempts which address the problem is that they do not ultimately emerge from the particular examples they select in discussion to develop a methodology for the study of Iranian novels by considering the text, the context, and the genre. What aggravates the situation is the status of literary studies in the Iranian sphere: in spite of the development of academic institutions that have stimulated a slight curiosity in sciences in the past decades, literary studies has not been successfully established as a modern and relevant discourse which has clear premises, scientific methods and research goals. As a result, the field is not yet conceived as a discipline proper and literature seems to have become a decorative discourse, an added value, a cause for prestige, but it is not attributed a real value in and of itself.

The position of the novelistic in the Iranian market is also an issue: “serious” novels (as they imagine themselves to be) do not have a significant share of the circulating social discourses. What is not clear, however, is whether this is because they are inherently unappealing to readers or that state control, which intervenes in the formation of a market around their discourses, troubles them. Likewise, even the concept of serious literature itself is in crisis, which is a symptom of socio-cultural crises the Iranian society is undergoing and the Persian novel is only one of their embodiments. It seems to me that the fundamental problem of literature and criticism in Persian is knowledge, because the literary system is afflicted by an amateurism which, despite good intentions and hard work, constantly fails to develop into a knowledge producing institution that responds to relevant and urgent questions and accumulates the opinion of experts to come to a better grasp of its own condition.

As a partial response to these problems, the present study deals with fundamental questions about the novelistic in the Persian literary system, the literary discourse in the Iranian social sphere, and modern