The novel in Iran
A significant implication of previous chapters is that a specific feature of the novelistic discourse in Iran is an existing lag between literary production and criticism. This means that the characteristics of the tradition are still unknown and, beyond the general implications of its peripherality, it is not clear in what terms and to what extent it is similar to or different from other novelistic traditions. As a result, establishing proper grounds of comparison to enter the international networks of literary exchange has become difficult, if not impossible. At the same time, neither have the genre’s aspects been properly delineated nor its presence or functions legitimized in the Iranian context. The critical lag emerges most obviously in the extant histories of modern Persian literature, which were briefly engaged in discussing *The Blind Owl*. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide a history of the novel in Persian in a summarized form. Rather the aim is to revisit available histories from a generic point of view to put the Persian novelistic tradition in perspective and to discuss how the critical lag has an impact on its participation in world literature.

The history of the novel in Iran began with the translation of James Morier’s *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* in 1886-87, which was not published until 1905 in Calcutta.\(^1\) The first novel written originally in Persian is Zeinol‘abedin Maraghehi’s *Siyahat-nameh Ibrahim Beig (Ibrahim Beig Travelogue)*, written in three volumes and published respectively in Cairo (1903), Calcutta (1905) and Istanbul.

---

\(^1\) For a review of this translation’s history and the reasons why it is published with such a delay, see Esmaeil Haddadian-Moghaddam, “Agency in the Translation and Production of *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* into Persian”, *Target: International Journal of Translation Studies*, XV/1 (2011), 206-34.
These beginnings lead to a history which is generally divided into three periods: the pioneers (1895-1941), the middle generations (1953-1979) and the post-revolutionary novels (1979 and after). During the first period, historical and social novels are dominant; the former was motivated by a rising nationalism and the latter was energized by the will to display the negative impacts of modernization on Iran. The most significant feature of the second period is the dominance of the concept of committed literature that called for revolution. The third period is characterized by the ascendance of the novelistic in the literary space, with the revolution and the war with Iraq among the major themes of novelistic production.

This categorization, however, is thematic rather than generic and is based on political history’s timeline. As a result, it neglects two major sources of the novelistic in Iran. The first is the non-canonical history of the novel in Persian, which consists mainly of popular novels and romances: this kind of literature has always been underestimated by literary history which, due to certain biases, refuses to accept the popular novel as literature. The second consists of translated novels, which not only introduced the novelistic into the literary system and formed the discourse in Persian, but still remains an important source for catering to the appetite for novels in contemporary Iran. Since the market share of these two sources exceeds that of the canon, their influence on forming the novelistic in Persian seems to be undeniable and, as such, they deserve their fair share in literary history.

What needs to be investigated is the impact of non-canonized novelistic products and translations on the canon as well as potential mutual influences they receive from the canon as a consequence of their coexistence. However, as long as literary history looks to

---

2 It is particularly interesting to note the locations from where the history of the Persian novel begins. This is partly due to political strife and partly rooted in the way literary institutions functioned at the time.
