

Kamran Cross

14 January 2008

The Father of Modern Poetry and the Qasida

It is said that one of the final steps to mastering a new language is learning to appreciate its poetry. Unlike ordinary conversation or even some forms of prose, a simple word-by-word translation of a poem will not be sufficient to understand it. Poetry relies on a vast web of intertextuality to be successful, a web that transcends the physical location of its composition and extends centuries back in time. To a foreign learner, the devices that make poetry delightful—an unusual word, a clever turn of phrase, a reference to a childhood rhyme—are the very techniques that can confuse a reader who does not share the same cultural background. Poetry is indeed universal in its themes, but really powerful poetry, it seems, cannot succeed without simultaneously drawing its audience, the reader and the listener, into its world and engaging with them personally, locally. This essay is an account, propelled both by research and personal narrative, of my journey into the world of modern Persian poetry and learning to appreciate what exactly makes it so good. I cannot expect to bring any kind of analysis to this poetry that a native Persian-speaking audience would not already know; instead, my position as a newcomer may itself be useful in highlighting certain characteristics of Persian poetry from a different perspective.

I came across my topic through an inquiry into the poetry of Nimâ Yushij, although ironically enough he is not the subject of this paper. Nimâ Yushij is traditionally credited with the creation of a ‘new’, ‘fresh’, or ‘natural’ kind of poetry that was unprecedented in the Persian literary tradition. This narrative is questioned in Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak’s book *Recasting Persian Poetry*, which traces the developments and innovations that had preceded Nimâ by a century and gave him the space he needed to introduce his own ideas, placing him at the end, rather than the beginning, of the movement to modernize Persian poetry. Originally, I wanted to examine a number of Nimâ’s poems and evaluate them on the basis of their word choice and sound to see how he brought about the natural cadence he so desired. As I read Karimi-Hakkak and learned about the impact the poets

of the nineteenth and early twentieth century had on Nimâ, I changed my direction and decided to revisit these poets and examine their works in the same light with which I was reading Nimâ. While reading these poems out loud and listening to audio versions of the poets' voices themselves, I slowly grew more attuned to the sound of the individual words in Persian and the emotions and moods they can help to convey, even before Nimâ came along and introduced the structural and metrical variations for which he is famous. Through this, I became increasingly interested in the various ways Nimâ's predecessors and successors experimented with sound and signification, even within a traditional genre such as the qasida. How would a classical structure sound through a modern voice?

With my new idea in mind, I started with what was probably my favorite poem at that time, "Nowruzâne", a qasida by Esmâ'il Kho'i. I loved this poem, not because of what it said (in fact I misunderstood its point for quite some time until a careful review some weeks later), but because of how it sounded when read aloud. Despite my lack of training in the qasida, there was something in his word choice and use of rhyme that conveyed a powerful feeling of alienation and resentment to me, even before I understood what most of the words meant. Of course, Kho'i is a contemporary poet; "Nowruzâne" was written in 1996. However, having studied Nimâ, I felt that I could compare Kho'i's work to other qasidas written nearly a century before by different poets and see what they had in common. It may be a bit unorthodox, but I decided to arrange my analysis in the same order I came to the poems, from newest to oldest. I hope that this can better illustrate the insights I had while researching this paper, and perhaps it may be useful for other readers, just as looking at a piece of art in a mirror can reveal aspects that our gaze would otherwise pass over.

To begin with, I would like to focus my discussion around a few specific elements of poetry, ones that Nimâ is known for his contribution to. The first is his fresh look at the rhythm and sound of words and his attempt to use them naturally in a way that resembled ordinary speech. The second is his movement from an external system of signification to an internal one. Both of these developments left a visible mark on the Persian poetry that succeeded him, even that written in the 'traditional' style, and will provide the axis for my following analysis.

In a taped conversation with a group of fellow poets, Ahmad Shâmlu describes Nimâ's approach to meter in the following way:

Persian poetry had a mold, many molds, some of which are prosodic. A poet with a deeper understanding of prosody and a finer sensitivity would select from among these molds one which bore a certain correspondence to the theme of his poem. For example, if his poem dealt with a caravan, some of the poets would create the rhythmic gait of the camel's walk...But later on this tradition of finding close correspondences between the content and the meter was completely lost...Then came Nimâ and said: 1) that meter should be in consonance with the mood of the poem; 2) that in our normal speech in a sentence we lay stress on some units and have natural pauses.¹

This was the shift that led to Nimâ's innovations in meter. It was not change for change's sake—it was rather a search for a language that would bring the poet back in touch with his natural environment. This called for a specificity of time and place, the use of local words for the specific flora and fauna of a region, the accord between the poet's natural speech and his verses.² In this way sound and meaning took priority over meter; as Mehdi Akhavân-Sâles says later in this same conversation, "Nimâ clearly states that what comes first in a poem is the word, the thought and the presentation of that thought, and not the meter."³ He and Forugh Farrokhzâd agree too that Nimâ did not inspire them to emulate him exactly—rather, he opened the door for every poet to find his or her own style and voice. We can probably assume that most major poets since Nimâ, including Kho'i, who I will discuss presently, would have thought about this question of sound and meaning and answered it in their work, whether they decided to abandon meter, invent a new meter, or employ a classical form.

The second major change that Nimâ helped bring about was a shift from an external system of signification to an internal one. This is not the easiest concept to explain in brief, but perhaps I can illustrate it with an example from Karimi-Hakkak. In one essay, Nimâ proposes that the poet can associate the beloved's long hair with a polo stick and the color of her cheeks with a judas-tree blossom. With these metaphors in hand, the poet then writes, "You strike the judas flower with your polo stick" to describe the beloved's

¹ Tikku, p. 18.

² Karimi-Hakkak, p. 242.

³ Tikku, p. 33.

hair resting on her cheek, a phrase so odd out of context it becomes funny and meaningless.⁴ Nimâ felt that this kind of symbolic language had gotten too far out of touch with the language of modern-day Iranians, to the point that classical poetry made no sense without the proper background and training. To address this deficiency, he sought to sever the traditional meanings that common metaphors and symbols had in classical poetry and reassign them new meanings within the framework of the poem. In this way, the reader is granted a new access to understanding that is not dependent on previous knowledge and experience, but rather a careful attention to the text itself. Although Nimâ was placing his poems within a specific time and place to bring his language back in touch with a particular environment, all the tools the reader would need to understand his message were now available within the poem, granting it a mobility and universality that it would have otherwise lacked.⁵ These characteristics of specificity, self-sufficiency, and emphasis on sound for meaning can be seen in the poetry from the '60s to the present. With that in mind, let us return to Kho'i and see how these elements play out in a modern qasida.

Esmâ'il Kho'i was a professor at Tehran University at the time of the 1979 revolution. Like many other important Iranian poets such as Bahar and Akhavân-Sâles, he was born in Mashhad and studied classical poetry in his childhood. In the '50s he moved to Tehran and became acquainted with the New Wave generation of poets who drew their inspiration from Nimâ. He became politically active against the Shah and participated in the Ten Nights of Poetry of 1978, an event in which sixty-one literati and intellectuals read revolutionary poetry at the Goethe Institute in Tehran. After the revolution, his friend and colleague Sa'id Soltânpur was executed and Kho'i was forced to flee Iran for Britain. On the Iranian New Year of 1996, Kho'i received the news that one of his relatives had been arrested in Iran, and so he wrote this poem "Nowruzâne" (At the New Year). It is a scathing denunciation of the administration of the Islamic Republic and all that it stands for.

⁴ Karimi-Hakkak, p. 247.

⁵ Karimi-Hakkak, p. 258.

Structurally speaking, “Nowruzâne” is a traditional qasida. The first two lines introduce all of the important elements of the poem—the tone, the meter, the rhyme scheme—which provide the listener with a kind of guide to orient their listening. Every unit, or bayt, of the rest of the poem follows this pattern:

kâm hamegân bâd, kâm-e shomâ na!
 ayyâm-e hame khorrâm o ayyâm-e
 shomâ na!

Let everyone's desires be fulfilled – your
 desires, no!
 Let everyone's days be pleasant – and
 your days, no!

The first word, “kâm” (desire, hope, aim), alerts the listener to a particular sound repeated throughout the poem (“-âm”) that will indicate the central points to the poet's line of thought. The word is used again at the end of the line, stressing its importance: “kâm-e shomâ na!” The next line repeats the sound in “ayyâm” (days) in a similar fashion. We now have an audio signal that marks the object of discussion in each line. Both of these things, “kâm” and “ayyâm”, are further united by parallel sentences. The author wishes that they will be good and successful for everyone (“hame”, “hamegân”), except for ‘you’ (“shomâ”), snatched out of your hands by the sharp negative, “na!” At this point, the pattern has been defined for the listener. The sound “-âm,” which is long and rich, will indicate the thing or the idea that is good, desirable, and the natural right of the people. This object of desire will be expounded and discussed and then completed by the sequence “-âm-e shomâ, na!” Now that the listener is able to key into these signals, Kho’i is able to elaborate on his theme and uses increasingly complex structures to develop the poem, and this in fact creates a heightened sense of tension and expectation as the poet builds up his metaphors. Every time a word that carries the “-âm” sound in it is mentioned, the listener will know that it will be repeated at the end of the phrase to be taken away from ‘you’. The beauty of this system is that, since the key word is signified by its sound and not by its position, Kho’i can play with his syntax and surprise the listener with the placement and context of his theme for each phrase. For example, in this bayt, he introduces the key word “jâm” in the second line,

z-ân gune ‘abus-id ke gu’i mey-e nowruz
 dar jâm-e hame rizad va dar jâm-e
 shomâ na!

you are so unsmiling it is said that the
 wine of new year
 flows into everyone's cup, and in your
 cup, no!

and in this one, the key word “saranjâm” is mentioned three times, at the beginning, middle, and end:

<p>ya‘ni ke sarânjâm-e hame khalqân niku khâham, be sarânjân-e hame o sarânjâm- e shomâ na!</p>	<p>meaning that for the future of all creation, I wish well, for the future of all, and your future, no!</p>
---	--

Other times he does not repeat the word twice in the phrase at all, but instead introduces his bayt with a word that reminds the listener of a synonym that would fit within the established rhyme scheme of “âm-e shoma na!”. For example, in this verse,

<p>v-in zelzele k-az ‘elm dar arkân-e khorafa-st khâb-e hame âshubad o ârâm-e shomâ na!</p>	<p>and this earthquake that comes from science on the foundation of superstition disturbs the sleep of all, and your calm, no!</p>
---	--

Kho’i substitutes the word “ârâm” (rest, calm) with “khâb” (sleep) in the first half of the second line. He makes similar substitutions with words like “din” (religion) for Islam (“eslâm”) and “cheshme” (fountain) for inspiration (“elhâm”). Adding a further layer of association, he will name the antonym of these signifier words, so we find the pairing up of “geriye” (tears) with “an‘âm” (gratuities), “khâs” (private) with “âm” (public), and “birunshodi” (escape) with “dâm” (trap). All of these manipulations and variations on the theme add a great deal of tension and release to the poem, making it much more interesting and enjoyable to listen to.

Now what sort of good things are being denied, and who is this ‘you’ they are being denied from? When I first read the poem, I thought Kho’i was assuming the voice of the oppressor in a sarcastic way. This reading held until I looked at the list of all the things that he doesn’t want ‘you’ to have or to fulfill. All of these objects are indicated by the sound “-âm” and then denied with the phrase “-âm-e shomâ na!”

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * jâm (cup) * shâm (supper) * bâm (house, roof) * anghâm (melody) * mâm (mother) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * khâm (material, resources) * ârâm (rest, calm) * ahkâm (decisions) * elhâm (inspiration) * nâm (name) |
|--|---|

At first these all seemed like positive things that an oppressor would take away from the masses. As the poem goes on, however, Kho'i begins to intersperse ambivalent or explicitly negative themes along with the positive ones, all tagged by the same marker “-âm”. Thus, along with the words mentioned above, we see “vâm” (debt), “râm” (tame, domesticate), “dâm” (net, trap), “esnâm” (idols), “e‘dâm” (execution), and “awhâm” (delusions). This forced me to reevaluate the thrust of Kho'i's statements in the first half of the poem, and it led me to realize that he is speaking from his personal view as an exiled professor, as a political refugee, as an ordinary Iranian. According to Kho'i, good things for the Islamic Republic become bad for everyone else. Thus he wishes the entire world a better future, except the Islamic Republic. That which the Islamic Republic advocates, he rejects. The Islam of the Islamic Republic is the only religion he denounces. The ‘you’ in this poem is the Islamic Republic, and it is by the medium of this entity that good is transformed to bad, quite literally within the text of the qasida.

The strikingly direct and angry speech within this poem took me aback at first. It seemed less clever to do a polemic rather than a satire, as I had first guessed it to be, and the sheer vitriol that comes out of this poem seems less approachable than other emotions he might have expressed. On the other hand, the forcefulness and power that I had immediately sensed through the mere *sound* of the poem was confirmed and reinforced by what he had to say. Having worked as much out of this poem as I could, I was ready to move on to another. I chose a poem that had been written more than a half-century prior, at a time of similarly high emotions and impassioned exhortations. This was the time of the Constitutional revolution, and the intelligentsia of Iran was out in full force in an attempt to forge a new Iran that was free of domestic tyranny and foreign imperialism. This was the period that directly preceded the rise of Nimâ and was dominated by figures like ‘Eshqi, Raf‘at, and my new subject, Abdolqâsem Lâhuti.

Lâhuti's rise as a poet corresponds directly with the important dates of the Constitutional period in Iran, and thus many of his revolutionary ideas in both society and literature can be linked to the general movement of that period. He joined a revolutionary circle in 1905, fought in Rasht under Sattar Khân, and eventually took a post in the

Tehran police force under the Armenian Yifrim Khân. Around this time he began also to publish his poetry in *Irân-e now*, the newspaper of the Democrat Party, and contribute articles to the progressive journal *Habl al-Matin* (following the footsteps of other poet-journalists ‘Eshqi, Iraj, Âref, and Bahâr). After the Allied invasion of Iran of 1914, Lâhuti dropped out of military activity and set up a new career as one of the editors of the anti-occupation journal *Bisutun* in Kermanshâh. Up till now, his ideology and poetry was largely nationalist with some vague leftist leanings; however, in Kermanshâh he was exposed to the more orthodox Communism of the Soviet army stationed there, which greatly influenced his ideology and earned him the sobriquet “adib-e sorkh” (the red writer). After Rezâ Khân seized power in 1921, Lâhuti returned to Iran and rejoined the constitutionalist Gendarmerie in Tabriz, which was in the midst of an uprising against the Cossacks of the Tehran government. The revolt was eventually crushed and Lâhuti fled to Moscow. He never returned to Iran; rather, he transferred to Doshanbe (or Stalinabad at the time), where he became one of the founders of Soviet Tajik poetry, composing the national anthem of present-day Tajikistan among other things.

In the literary world, the Constitutional era was a period of drastic experimentation and change. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, poets and intellectuals had been criticizing the seemingly irrelevant and self-absorbed nature of classical Persian poetry. The language had become archaic, the themes inappropriate, the audience nonexistent. Critics demanded a ‘new’ poetry that would be socially relevant and guide the nation along the path of progress, and over the last fifty years, poets such as Dekhodâ and Bahâr had introduced an explicitly social-political thrust that had heretofore been absent in Persian poetry. By the 1920s, this new content was taken for granted and in fact necessary for any poet who wished his work to be seen as relevant and revolutionary; now the focus was shifting from content to the form itself. The iconoclast Raf‘at began experimenting with foreign genres like the ode, ballad, and sonnet in his poetry, while ‘Eshqi showed a complete disdain for formal structure and composed poetry in broken, irregular meters. Lâhuti, for his part, also brought a subversive and revolutionary message to his poetry, but in a very different way than his counterparts. Rather than breaking off from the established system of form and signification, he worked from the inside to mock and destabilize it, thus emphasizing his vision of a dual revolution of

society and literature, in which one aspect could not occur without the presence of the other.

The poem under examination is the qasida “Beh Dokhtarân-e Irân” (To the Daughters of Iran). With the new dedication to the use of poetry as an instrument of social change, the poem targets the women of Iran, charging them with the responsibility of casting off the shackles of tradition, getting educated and involved with social progress, and eventually becoming the mothers to a new generation of free Iranians:

Teach your sons and daughters the nobility of work
so they would know that freeloading is a shame, a disgrace.
Speak to them of knowledge, freedom, and toil
so your children may grow up with these words.
Surely if you become such a good mother, because of you
the copper of the motherland’s fortune shall turn into pure gold.⁶

The tone, word choice, and rhythm of the poem also introduce a new focus within the traditional qasida framework, one that complements the revolutionary message of the poem. As we have seen before, the monorhyme scheme of the qasida allows for a great range of variation of sounds within each bayt. Even though he had no structural obligation to do this, Lâhuti chooses to repeat phrases in both halves of a single unit, setting up mirrored lines that throw certain concepts into focus. For example:

ta kay az zolf-e to zanjir neham bar gardan
ta kay az mojjehe-ye to tir zanam bar del-e zâr

chand guyam keh rokhat mâh bovad dar khubi
chand guyam keh qadat sarv bovad dar raftâr

nang bâshad keh to dar pardeh vo khalqi âzâd
sharm bâshad keh to dar khâb o jahâni bidâr

hayf nabvad qamari mesl-e to mahrum az nur
‘ayb nabvad shajari chun to tohi dast az bâr

The parallelism in these phrases is obvious. “ta kay az” and “chand” both mean “for how long”, which sets up a kind of hypnotic chant throughout the poem that suggests an urgency for change and a determination to effect it. The verbs in the second two lines,

⁶ Translated by Karimi-Hakkak in *Dismantling a Poetic System*, p. 191.

“bâshad” and “nabvad”, describe a future that ought to be realized, through the imperative “be” and the subjunctive “it should not be.” Other parallels are set up, such as “to dar pardeh” (you are veiled) and “to dar khâb” (you are asleep) before “vo” / “o” (while) “khalqi âzâd” (the people are free) and “jahâni bidâr” (the world is awake), again evoking the state of the society against a backdrop of where it ought to be. The constant repetition of similar-sounding phrases with the same basic meaning, like variations of a theme, with words that set up a stark contrast between a the state of the present and the dream of the future, give the poem the character of a powerful speech delivered in prose. Thus we see that the thrust to ‘modernize’ or ‘contemporize’ the language of poetry had already begun. There is very little tension and release by way of hinting at what is to be said, as we saw in Kho’i. It instead hammers repeatedly on the same point, using different parallel structures to illustrate its case and incite the listener to bring about the change that the motherland so desperately needs.

The theme is typical of the revolutionary rhetoric prevalent at the time. Women become inextricably linked to the welfare of the newly constructed nation, which is also given a female gender. Any true reform cannot take place without reforming the status of women, and once women are emancipated, they will naturally emancipate the entire country by bearing and raising a new generation of free and enlightened souls. Lâhuti takes the classic motif of the beloved, which is never named or even given a gender, and defines it as a specific population of a specific place, robbing the trope of its mysticism and universality and granting it in its place a social calling. The devotion and intensity towards the beloved object is still present, but the poet’s personal fervor for the individual is replaced by a devotion to the motherland, who is both embodied by her daughters and is dependent on them for her future. One feature that does not change, however, is that the beloved is beautiful. Beauty indicates worth, value, and preciousness, and even though the object of desire has changed from an individual to a cause, the cause is still so worthy of devotion and sacrifice it remains unimaginably beautiful.

Much of Lâhuti’s message is dependant on the past for its existence; that is, he needs a tradition to disrupt, ideally a strong one that hearkens back to centuries of unbroken transmission, in order to make his case for a new Iran. If he had written a poem that had

no connection to any traditional poetic forms and motifs, this message would have been lost. He therefore employs traditional images and structures in order to mock them through subversion and manipulation. In other words, they used conventional poetry to criticize that very medium. In “Be Dokhtarân-e Irân,” he takes a time-honored poetic tradition, the “anatomy of the beloved,” and parodies it to show its irrelevance and uselessness in addressing the needs of modern society. In this motif, each body part of the beloved is likened to a weapon of war, generally to express the internal conflict and struggle that is aroused by the poet’s love. Let us examine the following lines:

How long shall I place on my neck the chain of your tresses?
How long shall I shoot arrows of your eyelashes at my tattered heart?
Till when shall I be ill without the serpent of your braids?
Till when shall I charge your fingertips with murder,
or attribute to your eyelashes the quality of thorns?
What good is there in making a dagger out of your eyelashes?

All of these warlike images are common tropes in classical poetry, established by a powerful tradition of object substitution. He mentions the “chain of your tresses” and the “dagger of your eyelashes” because at one point, poets had associated the braids of the beloved’s hair to the links of a chain that would ensnare the lover, or the eyelashes of the beloved with a gaze that could pierce like a dagger. By Lâhuti’s time, this chain of associations had become automatic and assumed – the connection would not have been questioned. However, Lâhuti lists these images while omitting the links that are needed to make the association, which leaves the reader with a system of images that seem illogical and arbitrary. To quote Karimi-Hakkak, in this process of stripping the images of the references that bind them together “the image is reduced to hollow word-play, as if the entire point in using the image were to create a pair of meaningless homonyms. What could it mean, Lâhuti seems to be asking, to say: ‘I am diseased because I am away from the serpent!’?”⁷

Having mocked a time-honored set of motifs and stripped them of their traditional significance, Lâhuti then assigns these body parts new meaning, not as objects that affect the lover, but as entities that affect the body of modern society. Women, as signifiers of

⁷ *ibid*, p. 193.

that body, are necessarily included in this new movement, and thus Lâhuti creates a social message out of what was originally a romantic convention. However, he sticks with the original form and structure of a qasida, which complicates the reading of the poem – it is apparently good poetry due to its form and language, but it shocks and disorients the reader by disrupting the expected sequence of images.

Lâhuti's work still relies on an external system of signification that gives his poem meaning even as he is mocking it. A reader coming from no background in classical Persian poetry would have no idea what Lâhuti was doing, associating snakes, daggers, and arrows with the condition of women and the need for a new Iran, and indeed it would take a reader well-versed in the Persian tradition to understand that Lâhuti was intentionally parodying something and not making a fool of himself. It would not be until Nimâ that a structurally intact poetry that could forge its own symbols and metaphors would emerge and become accepted.

The story goes back further, back to Dekhodâ and 'Âref and their patriotic, epic verse. It goes beyond that to Qâ'âni and Bâhâr, who believed passionately in the innovation and timeliness of their poetry, as traditional as it was. There are dozens more poems and poets that can be brought into this study and analyzed along these same lines. For now, however, let me conclude with some of my observations and leave the door open for further inquiry. It seems to me that Karimi-Hakkak's argument is valid insofar as that many of the innovations Nimâ is generally credited for can be found in many of the poets leading up to him—an attention to sound and meaning, a new vision for meter and rhythm, the social relevance of the poem's contents, and overt political protest. A new system of signification, however, seems to have been largely the result of Nimâ's tireless efforts over the course of fifty years. His vision of an organic, natural verse that could stand on its own without relying on a thousand-year tradition of symbolism and metaphor led to a renaissance of creative, accessible poetry that swept up both the 'modern' *and* the 'classical' modes of expression. Ironically enough, Nimâ's efforts to tie his poetry with a specific place and time opened his work up to a global audience that could connect with his sentiments without having to learn the language of classical Persian poetry. It was this development that made it possible for someone like me to read

a poem like “Nowruzâne” without a guide and enjoy and appreciate it, while a poem like Lâhuti’s “Be Dokhtarân-e Irân”, as modern and relevant as it is in aim and content, required outside study before I could understand his ideas.

Bibliography

Karimi-Hakkak, Ahmad. *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 1995.

Naficy, Majid. *Modernism and Ideology in Persian Literature: A Return to Nature in the Poetry of Nima Yushij*. University Press of America, Lanham, 1997.

Tikku, Girdhari. *A Conversation with Modern Persian Poets*. Mazda Publishers, Inc., Costa Mesa, California, 2004.