Charand-o Parand. Revolutionary Satire from Iran, 1907–1909

Rebecca Ruth Gould & Kayvan Tahmasebian

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Review


Published as part of the World Thought in Translation series, which introduces non-western political, legal, social, and ethical thought to English-speaking readers, this translation and critical introduction to the weekly satirical column by Ali Akbar Dehkhoda (1879–1956), is a welcome addition to Iranian studies. The volume will be of particular interest to anyone engaged with the history of satire, popular journalism, print culture, and constitutionalism in the Middle East. The columns, composed in moderately idiomatic Persian of the early twentieth century, which must have proved a challenge to translate, are rendered into English that is both elegant and accurate, and are accompanied by annotations that will be helpful to specialists of this period.

Janet Afary and John R. Perry have assembled in this volume their translations of the complete print run of Dehkhoda’s weekly column, Charand-o Parand (a nonsensical term implying fiddle-faddle or charivari), including the last three columns written during Dehkhoda’s life in exile in Yverdon, Switzerland (p. 29). Each of these columns appeared in Sur-e Eșrāfīl (Eșrāfīl’s trumpet), an influential weekly periodical published from 1907 to 1909 in Tehran by Mirza Jahāngīr Khan Shirazi (1870–1908, also known as Sur-e Eșrāfīl). Dehkhoda was one of Sur-e Eșrāfīl’s regular contributors,
authoring both his weekly columns and all but one of the newspaper’s editorials (p. 50). Dehkhoda maintained his popular column for nearly two years, across thirty-two numbers of the periodical, from 30 May 1907 to its final issue on 8 March 1909.

One of the most distinguished satirists of Iran’s Constitutional era (1905-11) and subsequently the editor of a comprehensive Persian lexicography (the Lughatnamah), Dehkhoda pioneered and epitomised significant literary transformations of Iranian modernity. His early education in traditional Shi’i seminaries (p. 25) and his receptive encounter with modern European political ideas (p. 27), as well as his experience serving in different political positions, places Dehkhoda’s work at the intersection of power struggles that characterize Iran’s tumultuous history during this period. Dehkhoda’s greatest achievement in the work under review was to connect the Persian language and literature to a new source of power, namely the power of everyday language. In Charand-ovo parand, Dehkhoda identifies three contending powers within Iranian society, namely the court, the clerical establishment, and the European colonial interests. His columns reflect how each of these domains were coming under increasing scrutiny from all sectors of society.

Afary and Perry’s translations are prefaced by a detailed introduction that discusses Dehkhoda’s column, the Constitutional Revolution, the style and structure of the translated texts, and the author’s biography and intellectual trajectory. They also show Sūr-e Eṣrāfīl’s project of reforming Shi’ism and situate Dehkhoda’s writings in the context of the Muslim reformist movements of his time. The introduction is followed by translations of Dehkhoda’s columns, each of which is prefaced by an overview and additional notes. Topics range from addiction, to the hazards of journalism, to the Battle of Thermopylae, to indigestion, to Indian mystics, to scenes from public baths, and the Parliament. One particularly striking text is “Letter from the City,” which narrates the ramblings of a naïve city wanderer who, taking on faith everything he is told, concludes that “the religion of Islam” is simply “a few words, which I memorized” (p. 100), and who later speculates that “religion is actually the endowment fund” (p. 101). While such statements are presented as jokes, they could not but have had an effect on the reader. While the subjects are amusing, the writing style captivates the attention as much as does the content. The topics and themes provide full justification for the nonsensical name of the weekly column, and reflect the author’s immersion in the social life of everyday people, not unlike the journalistic writings of his Russian contemporary Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), who similarly combined nonfiction journalism with a career as a literary writer.

A multifaceted reformist campaign against oppression, poverty, and discrimination led to the establishment of Iran’s first parliament by royal decree in 1906. Until Mohammad-Ali Shah’s dissolution of the parliament and declaration abolishing the Constitution in 1907, newspapers such as Sūr-e Eṣrāfīl were almost the only means of propagating the progressive ideals of the Constitutional Revolution. New experiments with literary form and content opened new vistas for popular poetry (tasnif) and satirical prose in proliferating serial publications that disappeared after only a few numbers and which transmitted the revolutionary ideas among common
people. The public sphere was also affected by satirical prose literature, of which Dehkhoda’s column was an outstanding example, that harshly criticized the reactionary aspects of Iranian culture and society. Dehkhoda’s journalistic prose decisively transformed literary Persian into a language that was accessible to readers of all classes and backgrounds. Even illiterate readers could access Dehkhoda’s text through public readings in coffee houses (p. 3).

Nothing depicts the editorial project in which Dehkhoda participated better than *Sur-e Espāfīl*’s masthead (depicted on p. 30), in which the archangel Esrāfīl resurrects the dead, according to Islamic tradition, at the end of time. Ironically, here Esrāfīl’s trumpet declares the motto of the French Revolution: “liberty,” “equality,” and “fraternity.” The publication of *Sur-e Espāfīl* was enabled by the financial backing of Mirza Qāsem Khan Tabrizi (1882-1949, also known as Sur-e Espāfīl). Dehkhoda was the editorial secretary and Mirza Jahāngir Khan Shirazi was the editor-in-chief and contributor (p. 50). Mirza Jahāngir Khan’s murder in 1908 by the king’s order following the restoration of autocracy indicates how provocative *Sur-e Espāfīl*’s contents were from the point of view of Mohammad-Ali Shah and his close associates.

Writing under various pseudonyms and experimenting with various literary genres and forms (such as short essays, communiqués, telegrams, letters, and reports), Dehkhoda in his column exposed the most intimate circles of power and the most corrupt aspects of society. As brought out well by Afary and Perry in their translation, Dehkhoda’s writing is distinguished by his pioneering use of spoken Persian in a refined form that was pleasing to the sophisticated reader and to an uneducated audience. Assuming no higher status for itself than pleasurable delirium (as suggested by its title), in column after column Dehkhoda associates criticism of monarchical and clerical power with madness. He criticizes traditional political hierarchies by deploying different personas across his various columns, many of which fit into a well-established Persian trope, denominated a “wise madman” (*divāneh-yi āqel-jān*) by the twelfth century poet Khāqānī, and more generally called āqalā-ye majānin (the wise among madmen).

Although scholarly interest in Iran’s Constitutional Revolution has increased in recent years, there remains a paucity of primary source editions that would enable scholars without access to Persian to experience the flavor of the original literary texts of the time. Contextualized and comparative accounts of the literary ferment during the Constitutional period are an urgent desideratum, which volumes like this one are beginning to fill.

Given its reformist orientation and its sharp critique of religious fanaticism, the writings of Dehkhoda and his fellow constitutionalists have perhaps inevitably been marginalized within Persian literary history. This timely volume fortuitously brings together the skills of a historian with expertise in this period and a linguist familiar with the history of the Persian language (including its idiomatic usage, regional differences, and a range of lexical registers). The editor-translators combine their skills as they render Dehkhoda’s unique voice into English for the first time in complete form. The result is a volume that is a pleasure to read, and with significant potential for use in classes on Iranian history and culture, Muslim modernism, and nineteenth
century intellectual and social history. While introducing students and specialists to a major literary voice, this accessible edition of *Charand-o Parand* establishes a high standard for future comparative work on Iranian intellectual history in a global context.

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**ORCID**

Rebecca Ruth Gould 🌐 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2198-5406
Kayvan Tahmasebian 🌐 http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7011-9283

Rebecca Ruth Gould 🌐
University of Birmingham

Kayvan Tahmasebian 🌐
GlobalLIT
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