Nimâ Yushij (1895-1960)

Behnam M. Fomeshi (University of Sydney)

Writer / Author.
Active 1895-1960 in Iran

Nimâ Yushij (1897-1960), the first major modern Persian poet, developed a poetic form later called New Poetry, Free Poetry or Nimâic Poetry to remove the restrictions of traditional rhyme and meter. Although he was not the only or even the first trying to modernize Persian poetry, he was the one on whom was bestowed the title “the father of modern Persian poetry”.

Life and Works

‘Ali Esfandiāri (who later chose Nimâ Yushij for his name) was born on 11 November 1897, in Yush, a village in Nur, a city in northern Iran. His father, Ebrâhim Khān ‘Ezām al-Saltaneh Nuri, was a vehement supporter of Constitutionalism (Tahbaz, 2008: 20). He was able to read and write; the fact marks him as “a member of the Iranian elite at the turn of the twentieth century” (Karimi-Hakkak, 2004: 15). Tubâ Meftāh, Nimâ’s mother, was a granddaughter of Hakim Nuri, a poet of the Qajar era. It was in the middle of the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911) that the twelve-year-old Nimâ moved to Tehran in 1909 to attend Saint Louis High School, a French missionary school. Nezām Vafā (1888-1974), one of his teachers and also a poet, recognized his poetic gift and encouraged him to write poetry.

In the early 1920s Nimâ published “Qesseh-ye Rang-e Parideh” [The Story of the Pale Complexion], a poem in rhyming couplets, in thirty pages, at his own expense. “Ey Shab”, published in the weekly Nowbahār, introduced the poet to the public (Tāhbāz, 2008: 201). It was among the first attempts to free poetry from the constraints of rhyme (Nātel Khānlari, 2008: 56). He wrote “Afsāneh” [Myth] in 1922 and some parts of it were published in Qarn-e Bistom, a progressive magazine. In its final form “Afsāneh” was a long poem of 127 five-line stanzas. It was in the form of a dialogue, but without “said” and “replied” common in the poetic tradition. The poet’s fresh look at nature, man and the world contributed to the novelty of the poem (Zarrinkub, 2009: 230). In 1926 Nimâ married ‘Āliyeh Meftāh, a school teacher. She was sent to teach in Bārforush (present day Bābol) in 1928 and Nimā accompanied her. Unemployed in Bābol, he studied philosophy, logic, and jurisprudence.

The period from the publication of “Afsaneh” to 1930 was a prolific one for Nimâ. A lengthy poem, “Mahbas” [Prison], was written in 1924. Khânevâdeh-ye Sarbâz [The Soldier’s Family], a collection of poems in forty-eight pages, was published at his own expense in 1925. The preface to the collection, referring to the ignorance of the people and Nimâ’s perseverance, is considered a manifesto for Nimâic Poetry (Naficy, 1997: 38). With this collection, he turned from the romanticism of “Afsâneh” to realism (Āriyānpur, 2008: 40). “Sarbâz-e Fulâdin” [The Steel Soldier] (1928) indicated Nimâ’s sensitivity toward the sociopolitical issues of his time. The poem
glorified Colonel Ahmad Khān Pulādin, who tried to overthrow the Pahlāvi monarchy, but was betrayed and hanged (Tāhbāz, 2008: 159). “‘Oqab-e Nil” [The Eagle of the Nile] (1929), an allegorical work, was an implicit reference to the necessity of modernization in Persian poetry (Tāhbāz, 2008: 48). While the themes of his poems were influenced by the immediate condition of the society around him, their language, form and style were not far from those of classical poetry. In contrast to the more innovative “Afsāneh”, these poems are more conventional. In fact, Nimā realized that the cultural milieu at the time was not ready for too much novelty and through writing these poems he was looking forward to an opportunity to publish his more modern poetry (Tāhbāz, 2008: 11).

During the productive period that began with “Afsāneh” in the early 1920s Nimā was experimenting with various poetic forms. But, from 1934 onwards, Nimā contemplated the formal and theoretical aspects of Nimāic Poetry and wrote a significant number of poems most of which were not published. The successful outcome of this period of serious contemplation and experimentation was the publication of “Ghorab” (Crow) and “Qoqnus” (Phoenix), published respectively in 1939 and 1940, along with the article series Arzesh-e Ehsāsāt dar Zendegi-ye Honar-pishegān [The Value of Feelings in the Lives of Artists], published from December 1939 to November 1940 in the magazine Majalleh-ye Musiqi (La Revue musicale). Nimā published fifteen poems of his in the very magazine and tried to theorize modern Persian poetry in the afore-mentioned article series.

In the discussion of Nimā’s poetic development, Hamidiyān divides Nimā’s career into three periods, romantic, realist and symbolic. His frequent employment of symbols and his interest in (French) Symbolist poetry, including that of Émile Verhaeren (1855-1916), make his work comparable with that of with the (French) Symbolist poets. However, Nimā’s social symbolism is dissimilar to the highly abstract symbolism of his French–speaking counterparts. His concern with the social and political condition of his country moved him away from romanticism toward realism. He was also under the pressure of Rezā Shāh’s strong censorship, which pushed him from realism toward a particular kind of Symbolism. Nimā’s idea of innovative poetry and his belief in the central role of symbol in such poetry were also responsible for his poetic development (Fomeshi 2015). That explains his fascination with symbolic poetry during his poetic maturity in the period of relative freedom of speech following the fall of Rezā Shāh in 1941.

The freedom of press in the period following the fall of Rezā Shāh contributed to Nimā’s rising popularity. While the innovative poet was attacked by the supporters of traditional poetry, a younger generation of followers and admirers came to his defense (Fomeshi, 2015). Ahmad Shāmlu (1925-2000) in his poetry and Akhavān Sāles (1929-1990) in his detailed critiques spoke for an entire generation of poets when they expressed their esteem for Nimā (Dabashi and Dahdel, 2003: 97). In 1950 the complete text of “Afsāneh” was published for the first time with an introduction by Shāmlu. In 1951 “Morgh-e Āmin” [Amen Bird], the first and probably the most prominent instance of ideological poetry (Meskoob, 2008: 312), was also published. In 1952 “Moshkel-e Nimā Yushij” [The Problem with Nimā Yushij], an essay by Āl-e Ahmad (1923-1969), was published in ‘Elm va Zendegi. Nimā’s success in the literary world contributed to his success in other aspects of life and he bought a piece of land in Tajrish, where lived at the time many nouveaux riches and well-to-do intellectuals.

The 1953 coup d'état started a difficult period for leftist writers. Nimā was arrested and spent some time in prison (Āl-e Ahmad, 2008: 104). In 1954 Nimā Yushij Kist va Chist [Who and What Is Nimā Yushij?], the first collection of Nimā’s poetry, was published. It included an introduction and thirty works of the poet. In the next year Abu al-Qāsem Jannati ‘Atayi (1917-1993) published a book covering Nimā’s life, ideas and works (Āl-e Ahmad, 2008: 132). During his poetic career Nimā also wrote several instances of children’s literature, a travelogue, and several letters elaborating on his poetic theory along with significant number of poems in Tabari, his mother tongue. He died on 6 January 1960 and was buried in Tehran. In 1993, his body was moved to Yush and buried in the yard of his father’s house, as he wished.

**Nimā’s Innovations in Rhyme and Meter**
In classical Persian literature prose and poetry were easily distinguishable. Poetry, unlike prose, was symmetrical in its form and music. Even in the works that juxtaposed lines of poetry and prose, readers and listeners could easily distinguish between the two. Nimā developed a different idea of the form and music of poetry (Fomeshi, forthcoming). Nimā’s formal innovations cover rhyme, a significant part of the form and music of Persian poetry. Since almost the beginning of Persian poetry, rhyme was one of its central characteristics. “The division of the beyt, a single poetic unit, into two hemistiches of equal metric value has made the mechanistic nature of the rhyme scheme in Persian poetry highly visible” (Karimi-Hakkak, 1995: 311). Thus, rhyme had lost its function and turned into a mechanical feature of classical Persian poetry. Nimā revitalized rhyme in Persian poetry. Classical Persian poetry was based on beyt and rhyme formed an integral part of each beyt. However, in Nimāic Poetry there is no conventional beyt as the fundamental unit of poetry. To Nimā, rhyme was a musical element to connect related ideas, rather than conventional beyts, in a poem.

Nimā’s innovation in metrics was his most significant contribution to the form of modern Persian poetry. Throughout the history of Persian poetry, each and every line of a given poem had the same number of feet. This was the reason behind the symmetrical shape of Persian poetry. Nimā’s innovation was not a total break with tradition; like classical Persian poetry, Nimāic Poetry employs only one metric pattern in each individual poem. However, while the former follows the same number of arkān (metric foot) in each and every line of a poem, the latter employs various numbers of arkān in the lines of a poem. Traditional poets strictly followed the “quantity” of arkān and “its symmetric presentation throughout the poem” (Khoshchehreh, 2011, 38). For Nimā “quality” is fixed, while “quantity” depends on the line. He realized that fixed quality and flexible quantity would preserve the musicality of poetry and at the same time it is the idea, not the restrictions of quantity, which would determine the length of each line. This innovation contributed significantly to Persian poetic modernism. Nevertheless, Nimā did not stop his experimentations at this point. Nimā’s last poem, dated 1958, was written in two meters. Recently, two collections of Nimā’s works have been published for the first time by the Academy of Persian language and literature, the second of which includes poems that expanded Nimāic metrics.

The Dominant Interpretation of Nimāic Poetry

In 9 May 1943, Ehsan Tabari (1917-1989), an Iranian intellectual and a theoretician of the Tudeh (Communist) Party, published “Omid-e Palid” [Filthy Hope], a poem by Nimā, in Nāmeh-ye Mardom, a leftist periodical. In his introduction to the poem Tabari asserted that “one should not employ the old criteria to evaluate these poems” and that such poems “should be evaluated according to new measures of thought and judgment and their imperfection and fault must be revealed through these new measures and not any other” (Langerudi, 1998: 247). As the first major figure to support Nimā’s modernist innovations and to explain the difference between his poetics and traditional Persian petic practice, Tabari asserted that “today Nimā and others are just the forerunners” and “if the philosophy behind this innovation is justified, it should be supported” (Langerudi, 1998: 306). Tabari’s justification of Nimā’s poetic innovations in the first Iranian Writers’ Congress, one of the most significant literary events of the 20th-century Iran, was a timely contribution to Nimā’s reputation among the established literary figures (Fomeshi, 2019).

The interlocking of literary and political discourses during the constitutional period paved the way for the oppositional political stance of Iranian literary modernism. “Nima and his followers articulated the concept of poetic modernity primarily in terms of an oppositional political stance” (Karimi-Hakkak, 1995: 5). Nimāic Poetry was from the beginning hailed as the poetry of “rebellion” against, “negation” of, and “objection” to those opposing the regime (Zarrinkub, 2009: 232). Nimā’s oppositional political stance can be traced in his poetry. “Sarbāz-e Fuladin” (1928) indicated his sensitivity toward the sociopolitical issues of his time. Nimā showed his trust in the inner power of the people and expressed optimism toward their victory over despotism in poems such as “Pādshāh-e Fath” [The King of Victory]. To compensate the loss of his audience after the stop of Majalleh-ye Musiqi, Nimā came closer to the Tudeh party, which was leading the literary movements through its publications.
There was an association between oppositional politics and poetic modernism; the magazines that supported the constitutional movement often published modern Persian poetry and those that supported the monarchy either opposed or ignored such poetry. Tudeh realized, reinforced, and took advantage of this association and approached the intellectuals and innovative artists and writers, including Nimā (Eslāmi, 2008: 91). For instance, Kabutar-e Solh, a leftist periodical, called him “Maestro Nimā” to use his reputation to further its political aims.

Through the interpretive activities of leftist critics, a novel interpretation of Nimāic poetry was proposed. In the Persian poetic tradition, “night” had “mystical” and “personal” connotation; it conveyed separation from the beloved, whether God or a fellow human being. However, Tabari in his introduction to Nimā’s “Omid-e Palid” read the “morning” as “the dawn of a new society and a modern life system” and the “night” as “reaction, backwardness, ignorance and corruption of the contemporary society” (Langerudi, 1998: 247-48). Through Tabari’s reading of Nimā’s poetry the word came to be read as an allusion to the sociopolitical situation. Nimā was so pleased with Tabari’s interpretation that he wrote a letter to Tabari and thanked him for it. That reading of “Omid-e Palid” along with several other poems published in the same period “signaled a new strategy of signification, which gradually came to be known as ‘social symbolism’” (Karimi-Hakkak, 1995: 54). That “new strategy of signification” was supported and publicized by leftist critics.

Two major leftist thinkers, Tabari and Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad (1923-1969), supported Nimā’s poetic modernism. According to Tabari, Nimā revolutionized Persian poetry in both form and content; “Nimā’s personality was a combination of Victor Hugo, who took the fortress of rhymes, and Vladimir Mayakovsky, who put poetry at the service of the revolutionary class of the history” (Khosravi, 2017: 114). To Āl-e Ahmad, “to defend Nimā is to defend the revolutionary poetry” (Khosravi, 2017: 116). All such comments along with the leftist critics’ appreciation of Nimāic Poetry contributed to reading Nimāic poetry in the light of leftist (revolutionary/oppositional) ideology. The earliest definition of modern Persian poetry coincided with that of poetry free in form and “politically-engaged” in content. This interpretive practice, initiated in 1940s around Nimā’s poetry, formed the dominant poetic discourse of the country up to 1979 Revolution.

The Father of Modern Persian Poetry?

“The process of esthetic change, and the readings and writings designed to bring it about, are ultimately collective and communal” (Karimi-Hakkak, 1995: ix). However, in the process of Persian poetic modernism a single person receives all the credit. Although Nimā was not the only or even the first trying to modernize Persian poetry. Shams Kasmāyi (1883-1961), Taqi Raf’at (1887-1920), Abu al-Qāsem Lāhuti (1887-1957), and Ja’far Khāmeneh (1887-1983) before him and Shin Partow (1907-1997), Mohammad Moqaddam (1908-1996), Tondar Kiā (1909-1987) and Hushang Irāni (1925-1973) almost at the same time as him also tried to do so, yet Nimā is the only one to receive the accolade “father of modern Persian poetry”. Why is this the case? In addition to the support Nimā received from leftist writers and critics from the 1940s onwards (Fomeshi, 2019), there are other reasons of a primarily literary nature. Nimā’s innovations were not the opening, but the height of a process that originated a century earlier. While changes in content and poetic diction before Nimā, although significant, were not “visible to the naked eye or immediately perceptible in other ways” (italics mine) (Karimi-Hakkak, 1995: 234), the innovations in rhyme and meter developed and theorized by Nimā, were perceptible to all readers and listeners of Persian poetry. Furthermore, the fact that his production, in both theory and practice, was more substantial than that of any previous poet or critic promoting poetic modernism should also be taken into consideration (Fomeshi, 2015). In addition to reasons previously mentioned, the fact that his innovations covered all aspects of Persian poetry, including content, diction, external form, and structure, contributed significantly to his status as the father of modern Persian poetry. As indicated in the title of the book Khatāb beh Parvāneh-hā va Cherā Man Digar Shā’er-e Nimāi Nistam [To Butterflies and Why I Am No Longer a Nimāic Poet] (1995) by Rezā Barāheni (1935-), a contemporary poet and critic, the status of Nimā in the history of Persian poetic modernism makes each and every poet after him define themselves in relation to this central figure.
Note: The author wishes to express his gratitude to Adineh Khojastehpour for her insightful comments and intellectual support.

Translations into English:


References
