



Review Article

Hafiz: The Spirit of Iran

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the effect of the medieval Persian poet *fi* Sh r z (d. 791/1389)—in his poetic language, thought, philosophy, and teachings—on modern Iranians. By exploring *fi*'s verses and applying them to different modes and times through the modern society, I hope to demonstrate the extent of *fi*'s influence on the people of Iran and the nation's attitude toward the poet. *fi*'s importance in Iranian society cannot be underestimated. Before the formation of the modern system of colleges and universities, *fi*'s *Div n* was studied as a subject of literary research (*fi*-*shin s*), along with Sa d's *Gulist n* and the Qur n (Solati, 2013, introduction). *fi* is viewed not only as a poet but also as the incarnation of Iran's national spirit: "His poetry is so profoundly entwined into the essence of Iranians that it might be said that to know Persians, one must know *fi*, and likewise, that an in-depth understanding of the Persian character is impossible without understanding *fi*" (Solati, 2013, pp. 21-22). His work is broadly considered to be unequalled; over the past seven centuries in Persia, no writer has matched his poetic skill, although many have tried. My close readings suggest reasons for the profound influence of this fourteenth-century classical Persian poet on today's Iranian culture and society.

INTRODUCTION

The National spirit

The history of Iran is a constant interaction of centripetal and centrifugal forces. But each time Iran has disintegrated, it has reunified and prospered in the process. Geographic as well as economic factors have played roles in these cycles (Rypka, 1968, pp. 76–77). Even under foreign dynasties Iranian unity was not shattered, because the state continued to be run by Iranians whose commitment to political equality and national community spirit was unwavering. Although the diversity of peoples and tribes that inhabited Iran certainly could have pushed it in a different direction, Iranian culture ironed out all these differences with a magnetism that impressed even non-Iranians. From ancient time up to the present day, history has proved the Iranians to be a spiritually gifted nation more moved by emotion than by reason and logic. This is borne out by the appearance of so many remarkable poets and scholars throughout the country's history. The emergence of so many fanatics, reformers, and heretics can be attributed to centuries of anguish, disillusionment, and a characteristic disinterest in material things. In this regard *fi*'s teaching has had a dominant influence on the Iranian psyche:

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If you fall in love with worldly property, you will have nothing to show, Under this firmament, even the throne of Solomon dissolves in the wind. fi, if you view the advice of the wise as reproach, Let us cut the story short and "wish you a long life!"

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, (Vol. 2). P. N. Khanlari, g. 69, v. 4, 5)

Neither the life of Khizr nor the state of Alexandre last Do not, Dervish, resist this repulsive world.

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, (Vol. 2). P. N. Khanlari, g. 285, v. 5)

The dangling locks of the darling of the world are twists and tricks; The spiritual and mystics do not dispute over her hair strand.

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, (Vol. 2). P. N. Khanlari, g. 288, v. 6)

Do not tie your heart to the world, and seek in drunkenness The cup's reward and the tale of prosperous Jamshid.

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, v. 3)

We must not, however, judge Iran's spirit by the occasional turbulence of recent history (Rypka, 1968, p. 77).

The Consistency of Literature and Culture throughout the Persian History

The literary history of Persia and of the Persian language begins roughly with the arrival of Islam in Iran. But Persian literature has not been limited to the Persian language. In fact, in the first centuries of Islam, Iranians played a significant role in the progress of Arabic literature, and they continued to make substantial contributions to it later. Our review should therefore account for Persian literature written in Arabic, although the brevity of this survey article only allows us to consider this subset of Iranian literature briefly. We should not lose sight either of the fact that historic Iran broadly stretched as it was contained many Iranian tribes, dialects, and even languages. To the literary historian these expressions are less important as, with few exceptions, they proved unable to sustain written literatures and gave way to the dominance of Persian. Yet there were also tribes living in Iran of culturally non-Persian origin who, despite possessing a non-Persian native language, were imaginatively involved in Persian literature. Prominent among were the Azerbaijan Turks. The importance of this becomes clearer when we bear in mind that the borders of the Muslim realm of Iran changed very significantly in the course of time, with Central Asia and Khazars waxing and waning in their influence. Under the Safavids' rule first Iraq, then Afghanistan, and finally the Caucasian provinces were lost.

The ethnically Iranian border regions bore the growing force of Turkish power. All these provinces, to whatever nationality they belonged and sometimes they were no longer subject to the state sovereignty of Iran at all added by to the wealth of Persian literature. However, the scope of action of Iranian culture and particularly the community sentiment of the dervish orders extended far beyond the frontiers of the kingdom, into Ottoman Turkey and northwest India. These vast terrains, thoroughly connected to Persian literature, took a vigorous part in its formation especially the Indians, to an extent that we can truly speak of an Indo-Persian literature (cf. Stanford, 1986, pp. 297–313).

As a result, Persian literature, like the Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, Latin, and Greek literatures, is a complex whole resulting from the common endeavor of nations that, in this case, extend from the Mediterranean to beyond the borders of India. This anthropo-geographical arrangement has given the literature great diversity and extensive distribution. When we add the Iranian contribution to writing in Arabic, the ensuing Persian literature reveals itself as part of the communal accomplishment of the races and peoples that came into contact through Islam, a multinational culture that has in the past so remarkably enhanced human civilization (Rypka, 1968, pp. 111–112).

If there has been any stability in the history of Persia, this has rested on the consistent nature of the Persian culture and solid continuity of its remarkable literature. Iran has been home to many master philosophers, poets, mystics, and scholars, none more important to the people of Iran than Rumi. Although he lived almost seven centuries ago, the echo of Rumi's voice, his words of wisdom, and his teachings to mankind are very much alive in the Iranian psyche and spirit.

Rumi has street-touch." Comparing Rumi to Shakespeare, Peter Avery (2007) reminds us how much easier it is for the native, even illiterate, Iranian to grasp the challenging theological, spiritual, and social references in Rumi's poems, to recite his stanzas by heart with sophistication and profundity of emotion, than it is for the modern educated English speaker to recognize even the most rudimentary of Shakespeare's literary allusions (Lewisohn, 2012, introduction). Despite the magnitude of Rumi's contribution, the historical details of his life are exceptionally vague, and the brief references found in *tadhkiras* (anthologies with biographical sketches) are often unreliable and sometimes even fabricated.

This dearth of reliable information has persuaded some scholars and researchers to use Rumi's own poetry as a reference for factual details about his life and historical milieu, sometimes to an unreasonable degree. The earliest surviving document about Rumi is an introduction to Rumi's *Divan* (or collection of works), written by one of his contemporaries, who was widely believed to have been named Muhammad Gulandam (Hafiz, 1320/1941). However, scholars are still uncertain about the true identity of this author as well as the accuracy of the text (Khurramshahi, 2002). Rumi is considered by his admirers and many scholars of Rumiology as the poet of love; in fact, he was inspired by the poetic tradition known as the religion of love (*madhhab-i 'ishq*) (Lewisohn, 2012).

*Once Love taught me the art
Of fine speech, all my words became
The key to debates in every congress.*

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, (Vol. 2). P. N. Khanlari, g. 211, v. 7)

*I have never seen a more magnificent reminder
Than the words of love that remain in this revolving dome.*

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, (Vol. 2). P. N. Khanlari, g. 211, v. 7)

Rumi's Influence on Persians as a Spiritual People

Every Persian has a private connection to Rumi. It matters not whether he or she is erudite, spiritual, illiterate, or a *rind* (inspired libertine), as Rumi called himself. All Persians find in him a piece of themselves, discern in him an uncharted place, a sweet-scented memory from the inner garden of which he is the sole protector. It is because of this emotional intimacy with him that the poet's tomb is a place of pilgrimage for all Persians. People from all corners of the society—writers, poets, scholars, prime ministers, lowly bureaucrats, and beggars—go there to save themselves and receive the poet's message in the peaceful silence of their heart (Shayegan, 1995, p. 16)

*When you pass by our tomb wish for benediction,
For to the rinds of the world it will be a place of pilgrimage.*

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, (Vol. 2). P. N. Khanlari, g. 201, v. 3)

How can we explain the popularity of Iran's most perplexing poet? How do we merge his symbolic language with a fame that makes Rumi a bosom friend in every household? His power to speak to Persians is due not so much to the simplicity of his diction as to the enigmatic messages that it awakens in all listeners and readers, all of whom seem to find in it an answer to their questions, a reference to their desires, an understanding of their secrets.

For example, love in *fi* takes different forms depending on which level it is imagined on. For some, it will be fervent and worldly love; for others, it will be a deep longing for their original dust. For all those who, opening themselves to what lies behind the veil of ciphers, reach to a level of first events, it will be the heavenly Cherished Friend (Browne, 2002; Shayegan, 1995, p.16). This is how the poet connects to his admirers, by providing them with what they desire, “because for *fi* love, spiritual and profane, is the very essence of existence” (Loloi and Oxley, 2013, p. xvi). In an introduction to Persian literature (*Bah r va adab-i F rs*), Bah r (1373/1994) asserts that poetry is only recognized as good when the imagination of the poet instigates its composition (v.2, p. 4). In Bah r’s opinion, it is impossible for someone of bad character to compose verses that please people of all classes. This kind of poetry must come from a righteousness of spirit (Gulbun, 1351/1972, v. 4, pp. 3–6). Bah r further asserts that the finest poets develop their art, their ability to compose the most eloquent ghazals, because of their devotion to *fi*, following his style in great detail (Bah r, 1373/1994; cf. Solati, 2013).

Thus, appreciative listeners and readers vary according to their understanding, or insensibility, but no one goes away empty-handed. “With the reading of *fi*, as with the Qur’ n, the less one comprehends intellectually, the more one receives spiritually” (Shayegan, 1995, pp. 16–17). By the connotation of concealed tonalities infinitely echoing on the senses, changing correspondences into expressive states increasingly intensified, this poetry penetrates the heart, creating a juxtaposition of states of the soul, by which the individual soul and the symbolic sense of the poem synchronize and harmonize in the mystical formation of a specific state.

The Lord of pre-eternity offered us the Treasure of love’s sorrow. So that we may descend into this ravaged dwelling

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, (Vol. 2). P. N. Khanlari, g. 364, v. 3).

As Dick Davis (2012) asserts, *fi*, more than any other Persian poet, constantly suggests shifting possibilities of meaning. This is certainly one explanation for his enormous reputation: the ability of his poems to be read perfectly legitimately in a number of ways, making him the poet nearest and dearest to Persian-speaking readers (p. xxix). The other most important factor in *fi*’s popularity with Iranians and non-Iranians is the irony in his poems. To a person of cheerful nature the uncertainty of life under the oriental autocracy a state of mind promoted by Islam, especially the unhappy Shi’a was appalling (Rypka, 1968, p. 84). People stepped onto the political stage and then vanished as if they had never existed. No lasting progress followed. There was only random escape from dismay and violence. Fury, misery, and a feeling of complete insignificance prompted cynicism. Mysticism followed the same track. Rarely, in the literature of this time, do we hear humor, which in private life Iranians enjoy in abundance! Rare exceptions to the prevailing dour mood can be found in Ni m’s story of the Seventh Princess in the *Haft Paykar* and occasionally in Sa’d’s *Gulist n*, such as when the latter author notes, “If they take Jesus’ ass to Mecca, when it returns, it will still be an ass” (quoted in Limbert, 2004). In *fi*’s poetry, in contrast, satire, irony, and wit are copiously expressed.

*I repented and swore that I would never kiss
The salty lip of the cup bearer again; but now I am biting
My own lip, and I wonder why I ever listened to an idiot.*

(Lewisohn, 1391/2012, p. 89; Hafiz, 1320/1941, g. 312, v. 5)

The other aspect of *fi*’s appeal is his encouragement of forgiveness and pursuit of peace. Much as I hate to enter the realm of politics, here I see a clear need to do so. I do my utmost to be concise. Since 1979 Iran has followed an isolated route of confrontation in opposing the global influence of Western values and particularly those of the United States. To some extent, one could interpret this as anecho of the Iranians’ historical sense of their uniqueness and cultural importance. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 broadly heralded Islamic revival, showing that the belief that the Middle East would develop on a Western model had been erroneous. As often before, others followed Iran’s lead. The West’s repeated failure to adequately respond to reformist overtures from Iran already looks like a historic error. One such opportunity came after the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, when high Iranian authorities (not just the moderate president Mohammed Khatami but also the supreme leader) quickly condemned the terrorist attacks, and ordinary Iranians displayed their compassion with candle lit lanterns in the streets of Tehran again showing a noticeable dissimilarity between Iranian attitudes and those of other Middle Eastern peoples (Axworthy, 2007, p. 288). This expression of sympathy (for the mourning of a nation whose attitude toward Iran has always been unfriendly) recalls *fi*, who advised his fellow Persians to tolerate their enemies and not seek revenge.

*Of both worlds the serenity is these two sayings’ commentary:
“To friends benevolence. With foes tolerance.”*

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, (Vol. 2). P. N. Khanlari, g. 5, v. 7)

*Do not pursue cruelty and do as you please,
For in our order of faith, there is no greater sin other than this.*

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, (Vol. 2). P. N. Khanlari, g. 76, v. 7)

Another opportunity came later in 2001, when Iran gave significant help to the coalition forces fighting the Taliban, in particular helping to persuade the Northern Alliance to accept democratic arrangements for post-Taliban Afghanistan. In 2002 the Iranians were rewarded with George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech, which lumped Iran in with Iraq and North Korea (Axworthy, 2007, p. 288). Persians are a people motivated by spirituality. Although not everyone follows *fi*’s teaching, the echo of his voice in our minds cannot be ignored.

*fi, place your head on the threshold of submission,
For if you argue, fate will argue back.*

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, (Vol. 2). P. N. Khanlari, g. 151, v. 7)

*Plant the tree of amity so that it might bear the apple of the
heart’s desire
Uproot the sapling of animosity for it bears myriad of
predicaments.*

(Hafiz, 1320/1941, g. 111, v. 1)

As *fi* reminds us, whenever the voice of lust, greed, desire, envy, and hatred is heard that of compassion and kindness fades away. All these impurities are motivated by logic and reason, in *fi*'s opinion; they are what reason desires for it constantly has its own interest at heart—or, better put, “in mind.” This is why *fi* invites us to love and care instead of hate and hostility. Indeed, he considers true wisdom to lie in peace and kindness toward others. He urges us to be thankful for what we have rather than covet things we desire (Dashti, 1385/2006, p. 59). Many modern Iranian scholars and leaders have allowed *fi*'s words of wisdom guide lives of great achievement. Examples include Mu amm ad-Ta q Bah r (d. 1330/1951) and Mu amm ad ‘Al Fur gh (d. 1321/1942), a Q j r writer, poet, translator, and official (Milani, 2008, vol. 1, p. 152). In his essays, Fur gh called for greater attention to the classical poets, in particular those of the pre-T m r d era, who he argued were fundamental to Iran's national and cultural heritage (Fur gh , 1354/1976, vol. 1, pp. 224–226). Fur gh believed that for the Iranian people (and indeed for all of humankind) the key to rising from ignorance to humane and decent social behavior was to practice the teachings of the medieval masters (cf. Solati, 2013).

Cultural Modernization

Iran is not exempt from the global course of modernization, or from the latter's propensity to control and convert all parts of the world, subverting local cultures. The challenge of cultural innovation pits Western standards against local cultures, ethics, and ciphers, demonstrating sources of individual, mutual, and national vanity, as well as character, for the individuals of these societies. The Iranian encounter with the West and its modernity led to the evolution of several forms of accommodation. During much of the twentieth century, modern philosophy in the Iranian vein has generally subordinated social and political dialogue. In harmony with the state and with foreign powers, this philosophy espoused a national dogma that regarded Islam and Islamic culture as a system primarily designed to clash with modernity.

A second group of traditional intellectuals, including Jamal al-Din al Afghani, advocated accepting innovation into Islamic principles. Afghani, who worked diligently with the Iranian constitutionalist movement, united Islamic cultural teachings with Western scholarship, technology, and nationalist policies, paradoxically, in an antiforeign, pro-Islamic chauvinism. The objective was to harmonize an Islamic restructuring movement with modern science and notions by allowing modernity to absorb the tenets and culture of Islamic civilization. The predicament faced by profane ideology in Iran led to the emergence of Islamist beliefs that challenged Western ideologies and systems of modernity on nativist grounds. These forms of nativism have a significance beyond their own constancy in many social surroundings where Western Modernity has been viewed as a nuisance. Turning answers back into questions, these movements place an enormous question mark at the end of modernity's description of itself as the “complete answer” to the enigma of history. The contemporary rise of Islamic politics is part of a long and problematic effort to adjust to the modern culture of social variation within the historical and cultural framework of the Iranian social order.

The complications, pressures, and even the inconsistent environment of political Islam mirror the struggles of specific groups with the culture of modernism. Islam, as a doctrine and as a cultural structure, is endeavoring to produce an original cultural environment. In the absence of local cultural depictions of modernity in the non-Western world, understanding modernization is almost always a heavy burden. This was the case during the colonial and postcolonial eras, and it remains true today, when modernizing states are trying to keep their hold on power. Furthermore, as long as Western modernity proudly declines to come to terms with cultures and practices outside of its heritages, modernity will be properly viewed as an extension of foreign supremacy and unfamiliar cultural domination.

When practiced as authority, transformation often causes an overt and original blend of culture and politics, subsequent to a system of complaint I have called the “discourse of legitimacy.” I discussed this propensity in detail in a proportional study of Iran and Germany. Under circumstances of cultural relegation and political tyranny, culture becomes an influential alliance for politicization. Some manners of being—customary habits and routines—are first demolished by the transformation of modernity. In response to the test of innovation, societies, led by their literati, seek a renaissance of outdated culture. The formerly anathematized modes of being, now lost, are clarified through the minds of scholars, and “conventional” culture is converted from a mode of being into a political awareness and belief, offering itself as the frontline of the “soul.” The soul here signifies reminiscences of rural life. It is as though the modes of being have an after life or experience a revival in thought. The lost modes of life, or rather their enduring ciphers, are turned into a conceptual idea that offers steadiness in the face of intense transformation, and that draws on communal nostalgia. The most fascinating thing about this conceptual renaissance is that a worldly remainder of “being” remains, giving the ideology an ontological feeling that raises it above sheer intellect in the minds of its supporters. This ideology is intended for mass diffusion in rural settings, and it upholds a sign of spiritual rebirth.

The aim of ideologies based on discourses of authenticity is to uphold modernity, not to revive fundamentalism. What suggests the contrary is simply that the sentimental manner of politicization is particularly operative in the conflicts among rivals of contemporary ideologies, and this power has been recognized. The movements encouraged by these ideologies seek a precise form of modernity, one they view as consonant with general tradition. Since tradition has already been tangibly exiled and proven ineffective by modernity, their efforts must integrate tradition, be it real or imagined, with the objective foundations of modernity. There is a curious magic to this moment in that tradition picks up the objects of modernity as though they were never in any way unfamiliar, as if they were incomplete harmony with a primeval and original purpose. Of course, the point of rooting these objective forms in the partialities of the form is to turn them into a radical weapon against the intruding rivals. It is imperative to note that conventional custom does not merely melt in the natural course of time; instead, it is viewed as dominated by a stranger, alien tradition. The opponent is within and without, and society is called on to rid itself of all traces of the adversary's incursion.

In the cases presented here, this universal culture of modernity is clearly connected with a soulless greed that preys on the normal order of things. The normal order is understood in the given forms of premodern social grouping: family, clan, tribe, ethnicity, and religion. The shift from these horizontal forms of social organization to vertical forms, such as class and occupation, signifies the displacing of a self-evident uniqueness, forcing people to seek a new identity. The philosophy of realism calls people to hold these new forms while denoting them to old values, thus generating a bond of endurance where there once was hollowness in the people's souls. It is only with the calamity of secular political organizations and ideas that we have seen the rise of social movements based on freshly created Islamic and even ethnic identities. These movements endorse social and political establishments that are modern and plan to thrust modernization yet are emblematically imbedded in local and traditional cultures and practices. Based on concepts of individuality, these movements signify the fragmented and even global process of quantifiable modernization, on the one hand, and the localization or cultural accommodation of modernity, on the other. These apparently inconsistent formations should be assumed as the new and noteworthy appearance of modernities of our time. We should attempt to appreciate them and their effects in their specificity, without reverting to basic misrepresentations about the renaissance of ancient instincts or religious extremism (Mirsepassi, 2000, pp. 186–189).

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