

Understanding Iran: Importance of Poetry (Part II)

By: Muhammad Ali Mojaradi*

After the early Muslims broke out of Arabia and conquered two vast empires, most of the newly converted peoples were Arabized. Their cultures and languages were blended with that of the conquerors, producing the syncretic "Arab world" we are familiar with today. The only major exception to this rule were the Iranian peoples, who retained their languages and sizable parts of their pre-Islamic identities. With the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate and emergence of the Abbasids, small dynasties in Khorasan (the northeastern end of the Persianate world) began to enjoy relative independence from the central authority in Baghdad. The dynasties were mostly of Turkic ethnic origin, which would remain the case until the end of dynastic rule in Iran, but the language of the royal court and bureaucracy continued to be Arabic, following the example of Baghdad. It was in these royal courts far from the seat of power where Persian slowly reemerged as a language of recorded literature.

After the Islamic conquest of Persia, the New Persian language adopted a modified Arabic script (four letters were added to represent sounds not found in Arabic) with many Arabic loanwords. The new Persian poetry was written according to Arabic conventions, using the meters and forms originating in that language. The Turkic sultans were happy to patronize this new genre, as it served a dual function: It helped legitimize their rule over Persian speakers and immortalized their legacy in favorable terms (many minor sultans would be largely forgotten today or remembered negatively if not for the numerous panegyric odes written in their courts). The emergence of Persian poetry is a metaphor for Iran itself: part Islamic, part Persian, and totally unique.

The very first poems of the Persian canon remain mostly comprehensible to the modern reader. In a Tehran zürkhāneh, a traditional gymnasium where ancient warrior-sports are practiced and the sports are set to the tune of a drummer called a morshid (guide) who sings classical poems, a nearly 1,000-year-old poem is recited by him:

If your debased desires are confined, you're a man,
if you do not mock the deaf and blind, you're a man.
A man does not kick the fallen — he gives a hand,
if you help one who's fallen down stand, you're a man!

gar bar sar-e nafs-e khwad amīrī, mardī
bar kūr o kar ar nokta nagīrī, mardī
mardī nabovad fotāda rā pāy zadan
gar dast-e fotāda-ī begīrī, mardī

The same poem is remixed for the coronavirus pandemic, alongside a portrait of the poet Rudaki (circa 859-940) wearing a mask:

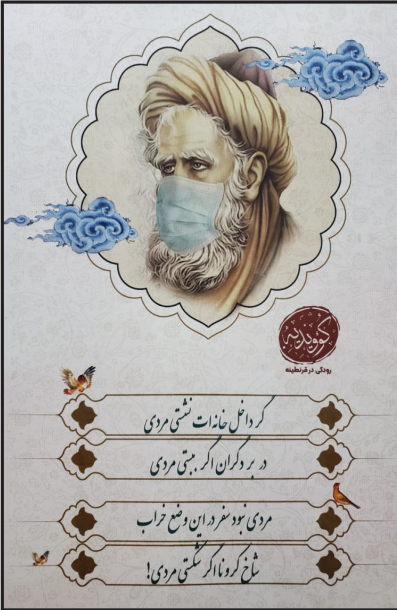
If at your home you do bide, you're a man,
if you let no one inside, you're a man.
A man doesn't travel in this troubled state,
if you seal corona's fate, you're a man.

gar dākhel-e khāna-at neshastī, mardī
dar bar degarān agar bebastī, mardī
mardī nabovad, safar dar īn vaz'-e kharāb
shākh-e koronā agar shekastī, mardī

The original poem is not quoted in the poster as it is assumed a literate passerby would already have heard it; both the language and the Persian understanding of manhood have weathered the test of time. This marks an important difference between Iran and the Western, and particularly the Anglophone, world. While English speakers add a myriad of foreign and newly coined words to their lexicon every year, Persian speakers are more reluctant and opt to craft local equivalents (as the French do with lesser success). Many Iranians even consider the excessive use of (particularly English) loanwords distasteful and conceited. Preserving the existing soundness and continuity of the language is far more important than carelessly acquiring foreign words. The default position of Persian linguistics is prescriptive, rather than descriptive.

These sensibilities also apply to the Iranian understanding of the past. As Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare are removed from Western curricula in favor of modern authors who address topics relevant to the contemporary reader (such as race or gender issues), Persian speakers continue to learn and recite poems of a bygone era. Their morality is found in the parables of Sa'di Shirazi, Rumi, and Firdawsī, which are still part of school curricula and daily speech: "Don't pain an ant who drags a grain of rice / for he's alive and living life is nice" (mayāzār mūrī keh dāna kash ast / keh jān dārad o jān-e shīrīn kh-wash ast). Like other Muslim societies, Persianate peoples generally consider morality divinely revealed and static. This contrasts with the dominant understanding in the West in which morality is perceived as constantly evolving.

* Muhammad Ali Mojaradi is a University of Michigan graduate, translator and founder of persianpoetics.com



Tehran Book Fair Opens With Participation of 2,600 Publishers

TEHRAN -- The 35th Tehran International Book Fair opened here Wednesday with the participation of publishing houses from several countries.

The Tehran International Book Fair, which is the largest annual cultural event in the country, is being held with the motto "Let's Read, Create" from May 8 to 18.

Book enthusiasts are provided with the opportunity to visit the book fair in person or tour it virtually at www.ketab.ir.

More than 2,619 publishers are participating in this year's book fair.

All publishers present at the event



have been provided with appropriate space. Additionally, the book fair has seen an increase in booths, especially for academic, educational, and children's publishers.

From May 13 to 15, the international book fair will also host an event to introduce Iranian publications to foreign publishers. Around 20 publishers participate in the event and visit printing centers and bookstores.

In total, about 60 foreign publishers are taking part in the book fair, presenting around 50,000 books compared to 45,000 books last year. Yemen is the special guest of honor in this year's book fair.

VOD Platforms to Premiere 'Okht-o-Reda'

TEHRAN -- Iranian VOD platforms have been featuring the premiere of the film "Okht-o-Reda" (Reza's Sister), coinciding with the birth anniversary of Hazrat Masumeh (SA).

The premiere began on May 08 and will continue during the Karamat Ten Days in Iran, which mark the ten days between the birth anniversaries of Hazrat Masumeh (SA), also the National Day of Girls, and her brother, Imam Reza (AS).

Directed by Mojtaba Tabatabai, the film delves into historical events dating back to 815 CE, focusing on Hazrat Masumeh's pilgrimage from Medina to meet her brother, Imam

Reza (AS), in Khorasan.

"Okht-o-Reda" offers a unique perspective on this narrative through the eyes of three central characters: the executor of Mamun's orders to transfer Imam Reza (AS) to Khorasan, Hazrat Masumeh's maid, and one of her brothers.

Tabatabai, the director and co-producer, underscored the film's commitment to historical accuracy, avoiding embellishments while dramatizing the events of that era.

The film's production notably took place at the Nurtaban Cinema Town, renowned for its portrayal of Islamic history, including the acclaimed "Muhammad: The Messenger of God" by



Majid Majidi. "Okht-o-Reda" features a cast of

talented actors to bring this significant historical event to life.

Bank of Iran's Marine Reserves Inaugurated

TEHRAN -- Iran has inaugurated its bank of marine reserves at the Iranian National Center for Genetic and Biologic Resources with the aim of protecting the country's marine resources as a national asset.

Masoud Sadrinassab, an advisor to Iran's Minister of Science, Research and Technology and head of the Center for International Scientific Studies and Cooperation of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology attended the opening ceremony of the Iranian Marine Reserves Bank where he emphasized the need to pay more serious attention to the genetic and biosphere reserves in the country. He described the natural marine reserves as a national asset and a factor playing important role in food security and the general economy, ANA reported.

"Aquatic animals in Iran, especially in the Persian Gulf ecosystem, which has a good diversity, need protection and attention," added the science ministry's center's head.

Also in the inauguration ceremony, Nasser Farrokhi, the deputy head of the science ministry's center reiterated the high possibility of generating wealth from knowledge-based products produced based on marine biological resources.

Farrokhi stressed the need for paying more attention to marine reserves in the Persian Gulf given the beginning of the exploitation on the part of the Persian Gulf littoral states from shared natural habitats.

Voicing his happiness with the opening of the Marine Reserves Bank in the Iranian National Center for Genetic and Biologic Resources, he further expressed hope that the protection of marine reserves will gain momentum through the joint efforts of all government and non-government bodies.

French-German Network Arte Buys Iranian Series

TEHRAN -- French-German cultural television network Arte has acquired the broadcasting rights for the Iranian VOD series "The Actor".

Directed by Nima Javidi and produced by Majid Motalebi, the series will be presented in French and German dubbing, expanding its accessibility to a broader European audience.

Scheduled to debut its first season on May 9 during prime viewing hours, "The Actor" aims to attract viewers with its diverse and high-quality content.

Starring Navid Muhammadzadeh, Ahmad Mehranfar, Hasti Mahdavi and Hanieh Tavassoli, the series delves into the lives of theater actors navigating intricate adventures after accepting a unique offer.

Each episode of "The Actor" presents a distinct story and atmosphere, as the protagonists, portrayed by Muhammadzadeh and Mehranfar, immerse themselves in various roles, from an addict aiding a concerned father to bandits orchestrating a surprising proposal.

The series' appeal lies in its versatile makeup and character designs, compelling viewers to follow the unfolding narrative.



Following its international success, including winning the grand prize at France's Series Mania festival and the best screenplay award at the Seoul World Drama Awards, "The Actor" is to make its European debut on Arte TV.

Muhammadzadeh's accolades, such as the Best Actor Award in the Horizons competition category at the 74th International Film Festival of Venice, further underscore the series' acclaim.

Moreover, "The Actor" has gained recognition as the sole representative of Iran at the Transylvania International TV Series Festival, affirming its status among European and Eastern European festivals.

In its third global appearance, the series competed alongside productions from renowned companies like Warner Bros Discovery and Amazon Studios at the International SerienCamp Festival.

Picture of the Day



The mansion of Fat'habad, also known as Bigler Begi Garden, is located in Akhtarabad, 25 km from the city of Kerman.

Photo by Mehr News