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# The Good Taste: Politics of Excluding Modern and Contemporary Literary Works from the Persian Literature Curricula

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## 1 Introduction

In high school, I was a modern poetry enthusiast dreaming about attending the University of Tehran a university that was, and still is, considered a pivotal institution in the study of Persian literature. I started my bachelor's degree in Persian literature at the University of Tehran in 2008. I soon realized that the curriculum the department had been using for over 80 years included very few courses directly related to my interests – only four units (two courses) out of 136 total were dedicated to modern Persian literature. When I started studying for a master's degree in 2013 in the same department, there were no courses on modern literature in the program. So, I had to pursue my interest in modern poetry and critique outside academia. I also found that I needed to hide my interests from some of the faculty members if I wanted to be taken more seriously. Indeed, working on modern literature, especially works published after the 1979 Revolution, was conceived as journalism rather than academic research. When I was preparing to defend my master's dissertation, I was advised by the head of the faculty not to post any invitation flyers for my defense on the department's walls (as is common in Iranian universities). He felt apprehensive about some of the senior faculty members disrupting the meeting, as my research was about Persian avant-garde poetry in the first half of the twentieth century – poets whose works are denounced and censored as 'cultural noise' and 'cultural invasion' by the majority of academics. My dissertation was an analysis of early 20th century Persian avant-garde poetry in order to form what David Damrosch terms a "shadow canon that includes minor writers who are now a distant memory and are overshadowed again by the greats" (Aston 2020, 73). Of course, this approach was not welcomed by academics whose careers are dedicated to teaching and researching the traditional canon of the greats or the hyper-canon.

Critiques of this confrontational attitude have diagnosed a backward-looking and omissive approach among conservative academics toward modern and

contemporary literature. Rezā Barāhani, a high-modernist poet, writer, and a former faculty member at the Department of Literature and Human Sciences of the University of Tehran, acknowledges this issue and claims that since the establishment of the University of Tehran, “the hegemony of literary reaction was so decisive that none of the prominent figures of literary modernism were invited for a reading or lecture at the university” (Barāhani 1985, 37). He believes the literary reactionary to these academics, particularly during the first half of the twentieth century, was even more fierce than the ideological approach of the political regime against their dissidents (*ibid.*). Mahmud Fotuhi also blames the traditionalist academics of this era who did not appreciate contemporary literature as they were not able to comprehend it. This ignorance, he states, was to some extent because the majority of academics were not involved in any kinds of creative writing, so they could not keep up with the fast-moving literary trends that are constantly evolving outside academia (Fotuhi 2013, 45).

Having said that, not all attempts to marginalize the modern and contemporary literary movements of Persian academia are necessarily analogous. Some traditionalists attack any literary work or theory, old or new, that represents a revisionary approach toward the established literary traditions. In their evaluations of literary works, this group of traditionalists does not consider the historical, social, and ideological context in which the literary work or theory was developed. That is, they assess all work based upon standards of the traditional literary canons. Indeed, if a text does not conform to the aesthetic standards of the classical masterpieces, it is deemed to have less value compared to those that do conform. Mahmud Fotuhi states that,

In the 1940s, exaggerated praise of classical canonical authors of Persian literature had become a norm. This exaggeration reached the point that even the second and third-grade writers [following traditional standards] were glorified in a similar way as the greats of Persian literature. In this regard, even their contemporary traditionalist writers who imitated the canonical authors were presented as first-class writers and, in some cases, as ‘national figures’ (Fotuhi 2013, 33).

On the other hand, some academics, particularly those active after the 1960s, have supported the overall literary modernization trends and included some modernist authors’ works in their teaching and research. However, they have only included those modernists whose works are considered ‘classics’ and acknowledged as parts of the literary canon, so they can study them through the dominant interpretive practice of reading literature in academia. In other

words, although these scholars study and teach the works of authors who belong to what is conceived as the body of literary modernism, they do not necessarily study them in the context of contemporary literary movements.

In addition, many scholars of Persian literature, especially the first few generations of Iranian academics active between the 1920s–1970s, did not differentiate between the concepts of modern and contemporary. Therefore, they did not notice the lack of contemporary materials in their research and teaching. In line with the periodization of world literature, modern refers to literature dating from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s, while contemporary literature refers to works dating after World War II. This time frame, more or less, can be used to differentiate between the modern and contemporary in Persian literature as well. Specifying and determining these two notions could help scholars see how literary studies on most Western and non-western modernisms, particularly research on twentieth-century literature, have failed to accommodate works created after the 1950s.

As Joan Retallack and Juliana Spahr state, “In fact, the greatest challenge facing the Liberal Arts has always been the contemporary” (Retallack and Spahr 2006, 2–3). They support this claim by referring to Gertrude Stein, who believed “the official ‘we’ is always about forty years behind what is actually going on in the arts” (ibid). Nelson Crawford, a literature teacher in the 1910s, states that the majority of his peers were not willing to include contemporary works in reading programs, in their attempt to exhibit “discriminating taste” (Crawford 1914, 562), going on to describe that including a “reading program of this [contemporary] character, indeed, means nothing less than failure to make study of literature serve its purpose” (ibid). This purpose, as he describes, has been for teachers to develop a “good taste in reading” in their students (ibid).

The history of contemporary literature’s exclusion from Persian literature programs is as long as the history of academic Persian literary studies itself. Robert J. Aston writes, “the teaching of literature entails not only the selection of certain texts but also the exclusion of others” (Aston 2020, 42). This process of exclusion carries “great epistemological weight, erasing, distorting” as well as reinforcing what the educational system counts as knowledge (ibid). Since the early days of establishing the first modern institutions for studying Persian literature, such as Dār al-Mo’alemin-e Markazi (later called Dār al-Mo’alemin-e Āli) in 1929 and later the University of Tehran in 1934, modern and contemporary literature had a minimal share of the curricula.

Over the past nine decades, conservative canonization movements led by the authorities of the field and their critical approach toward the notion of literary change have significantly impacted Persian literature curriculums and

scholarly research in Iranian universities. Academic critics of modern Persian poetry claim that, because of their anti-traditional nature and aesthetic immaturity, many modern and contemporary works could be potentially dangerous to the literary taste of readers and, eventually, the sacred cultural heritage of Iran.

However, one might argue that inculcating the so-called 'good taste' through curriculums results from an orientalist approach towards cultural production that tries to save the exotic flavor of art and culture in the East at the expense of its development. Both nationalist and religious cultural-political forces have supported this approach because they too were willing to build a regime of evaluation that functions to revive the glorious classical literature on the one hand and to depoliticize academic literary research on the other. In fact, advocating for 'good taste' leads to an approach that turns works of non-western literature into archival objects that must be preserved rather than developed. At the same time, this approach emphasizes the sacredness of the literary canon as reproductions of the hierarchical cultural and political regimes in the aesthetic system to protect it from any radical change. In other words, the politics of modern and contemporary Persian poetry since the beginning of the twentieth century has been primarily to demolish the traditional, undemocratic, aesthetic regime, which represents autocracy in the real world. This has been the main reason uniting both nationalist and religious fronts of Persian literary scholarship in their efforts to push modern and particularly contemporary literature out of Iran's academic literary studies programs.

## 2 Good Taste and Conscience in Intellectual Matters

Literary taste has always been seen as an ally of conscience. Matthew Arnold's essay on the wider social and political influence of academies in 1865 explores how French readers approach their literature: their primary consideration when facing a literary work is not whether it provides a pleasurable reading experience nor whether it has been emotionally compelling. Instead, Arnold argues the French want to know whether they were "right in being amused with it, and in applauding it, and in being moved by it" (Howard 1910, 486). This ethical approach to literary taste and the belief that there is a right and a wrong in evaluating literary works are termed as conscience in intellectual matters. Having a guilty conscience about liking any literary work but the canon, the reader feels bound to honor and pursue 'the good taste'. In a similar vein, the educators' ethical and intellectual conscience leads them to endeavor to

'refine' their students' tastes in an effort to ultimately make them better human beings. Alexander Gerard (1728–1795), a Scottish philosopher and academic, writes:

Refinement of taste makes a man susceptible of delicate feelings on every occasion, and these increase the acuteness of the moral sense and render its perceptions stronger and more exquisite. On this account a man of nice taste will have a stronger abhorrence of vice and a keener relish for virtue, in any given situation, than a person of dull organs can have in the same circumstances (Howard 1910, 490).

Gerard believes that achieving 'good taste' is possible only if a person's delicacy of imagination and natural acuteness of judgment is cultivated through a long and intimate acquaintance with canonical literature and cultural production. For those who believe in the conscience in intellectual matters or that conscience is informed by our intellectual pursuits, the literary canon functions not only as a model of excellence in writing but also as a knowledge that "people ought to know in order to help sharpen their taste and judgment" (Aston 2020, 47).

A similar approach in building a regime of evaluation for Persian literary studies has been employed by Iranian literati and particularly academics active since the 1920s. For them, literary works have only been considered teachable and worthy of the literary canon if they hold outstanding national or moral/religious value. For instance, Mohammad 'Ali Eslāmi Nodushan prefers Parvin E'tesāmi (1907–1941) over Forugh Farrokhzād (1934–1967) because he sees Parvin as "a representative of the noble and lucid soul of Iranians who sought improvement in their society" while arguing that Forugh "neither in poetry nor in her life could be a good role model for Iranian women" (Mir-Ābedini 2017, 62).

Believing in the conscience in intellectual matters was a consensus view among most forces of canon formation in the first half of the twentieth century. From the perspective of nationalism, canonical literary texts were considered national heritage and cultural treasures. Simultaneously, from the religious point of view promoted by influential literary scholars with seminary education backgrounds, canonical literary texts were precious treasures of Islamic knowledge, morality, and wisdom. Therefore, canonical literary texts, particularly those that engaged national or moral subjects, were considered sacred, and the faculties of literature were expected to protect their national and spiritual legacy.

### 3 The Process of Canon Formation

Before the notion of the literary canon was conceptualized and entered the realm of Persian literary studies in the second half of the twentieth century, it existed in the form of *ommahāt-e motun* (the mothers of texts) or *Āsār-e qodamā* (works of the classical authors) in studies of Persian literature. For example, Nezāmi-ye ‘Arūzi, the author of *Chahār-maqāle* (Four Treatises) in about 1156, writes:

Now the words of the scribe will not attain to this elevation until he [...] accustom himself to [...] read the books of the ancients, and to study the writings of their successors, such as the Correspondence of the Sāhib Ismail ibn ‘Abbād and Sābi; the *Qābus-nama*; the compositions of Hamādī, Lagani, and Ibn Qudāma; the *Gests* of Badiu’z-Zamān al-Hamadāni, ‘al-Hariri,’ and al-Hamidi; the *Rescripts* of al-Bal’ami, ‘Ahmad-i-Hassan, and Abu Nasr Kunduri; the *Letters* of Muhammad ‘Abduh, ‘Abdul-Hamid, and the Sayyidu’r-Ru’asā; the *Seances* of Muhammad-i-Mansur, Ibn ‘Abbadī, and Ibnu’n-Nassāba, the descendant of ‘Ali; and, of the poetical works of the Arabs, the *Diwāns* of Mutanabbi; Abiwardi, and Ghāzzi; and, amongst the Persian poets, the poems of Hakim Rudaki, the Epic of Firdawsi, and the panegyrics of ‘Unsuri; since each one of these works which we have enumerated was, after its kind, the incomparable and unique product of its time; and every scribe who hath these books, and stimulates his mind, polishes his wit, and enkindles his fancy by their perusal, will ever raise the level of his diction, whereby a scribe becomes famous (Nezami Aruzi 1919, 24–25).

In other words, studies of Persian literature from their very earliest days were centered around a list of standard authors whose works were acceptable to study in schools. These kinds of lists, with minimal changes over the past few centuries, have remained unquestioned primary sources in designing curriculums in the Persian literature departments.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines literary canon as “a body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study” (Oxford University Press). Aston believes the phrase ‘worthy of study,’ just like words such as rule, authority, and sacred used in other definitions of the term canon, “indicates control, regulation, and normalization” (Aston 2020, 43). Hasan Vahid Dastgerdi (1880–1942) was one of the leading traditionalist scholars who tried to create and regularize a body of canonical texts that could be

institutionalized through the first generation of Iranian academics. In 1922 he wrote a series of articles titled *Ash'ar-e sho'arā-ye ajam kist?* (Who is the grandest poet among Persian poets?). In these articles, Vahid Dastgerdi tries to establish a number of literary figures as 'the greats' of Persian poetry by quoting endorsements from other canonical figures about their works. However, at the end of the first article, the author warns the reader that Persian literature is facing a major downfall, partly due to the experiments of contemporary authors with other literary forms. He proposes that in face of this trend a new generation of writers must be trained by studying the works of classical greats in an academic manner to remedy the harm that contemporary literature has caused:

Indeed, today's literature is deteriorated due to the death of these men. And the current education system is unable to educate authors equal to their precursors unless they demolish the ignorance that is being presented as knowledge and establish proper higher education institutes in Iran (Vahid Dastgerdi 1922, 189).

After the establishment of the first modern departments for the study of Persian literature in the 1920s, the practice of canonization was taken on by the founders of these departments. The new academics tried to systematize a method of literary analysis centered around a particular set of texts that were endorsed by the previous generations of literati as more worthy of being taught than others. However, this practice of canonization, or granting teachable value to certain authors and texts, has been affected by cultural policies promoted by the major cultural establishments, either independent, national, or religious. That is to say, the canon formation, in a way, reflects the power relations among the cultural establishments within Iranian society during the first half of the twentieth century.

Three main groups of academics shaped the nature of today's Persian literary studies during the first few decades after the establishment of modern academia in Iran. The first of these groups was the nationalists, whose central role in the literary canonization process will be analyzed in the following sections. Second were the religious academics, who advocated the tradition of literary studies in the Islamic seminary system or *howza*. This group regarded mystical and didactic works of Persian masters in line with the doctrine of Islam. They developed a system of literary analysis based on Quranic rhetoric, explanation of the Quran, hadith, and history of Islam and classical Arabic literature. Mohammad Qazvini (1876–1949), Abdolazim Khān Qarib (1879–1965), Jalāl



al-Din Homā'i (1900–1980), and Badī' al-Zamān Foruzānfar (1904–1970) were among the leading figures of this group. Finally, I consider the role of the leftist intellectuals, who, despite their failure to ever establish a stronghold in Iranian academia, influenced literary studies from outside of universities through non-academic journals as well as literary circles, forums, and events such as the First Congress of Iranian Writers, sponsored by the Perso-Soviet Society in 1946.

Controlling the teaching of literature by forces of canon formation is not limited to the inclusion of certain literary works in the literary studies curriculum. It also encompasses the active exclusion of works and authors that do not align with the central ideas of those forces. Terry Eagleton argues that literature is an ideology itself, and it has strong and intimate relations with social power (Eagleton 1983, 22). Aston also refers to this statement, noting that if the literature is an ideology, then the canon is its object (Aston 2020, 42). Indeed, the association of some central figures of literary modernism with leftist political groups made them a common enemy of both religious and nationalist academics of the time. In this sense, these two major forces of the canon formation endeavored to push modernist writers out of the literary canon by labeling their works as plagued by communist ideology or blind imitations of Western literary movements. Mohammad-'Ali Sepānlu, poet and founding member of the Writers' Association of Iran, states that during the Pahlavi era, the consensus among ordinary people and conservative academics was that those who wrote modern poetry were "communists" (Sepānlu 2013, 28).

Although they did not get to participate in establishing the Persian literary studies academia, the leftist literary intellectuals, especially after the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in August 1941, actively engaged in a movement against the academic censorship of their work by traditionalists. As Mir-Ābedini puts it, traditionalists saw themselves as the "guardians of the literary tradition, high culture, and the good taste of Iranian society" (Mir-Ābedini 2017, 60). As a result, the only way for leftists to influence the literary sphere was to establish themselves as journalists and public literary intellectuals, as opposed to the academic *odabā* or men of letters.

#### 4 Revivalism and Guardians of the Good Taste

Unlike the leftists, nationalists and religious academics can be considered allies within the dynamics of the Pahlavi state's cultural policies since the very beginning of Reza Shah's reign in 1925. These cultural policies were embodied in the two significant notions of revivalism and modernization. However,

the state's cultural policies were not necessarily designed and dictated directly by the Shah, as were many aspects of the state's economy and politics. On the one hand, a group of literary figures and academics such as Hasan Taqizāde (1878–1970), Mohammad-'Ali Forughī (1877–1942), Mohammad-Taqi Bahār (1886–1951), 'Ali-Asghar Hekmat (1893–1980), Parviz Nātel Khānlari (1914–1990), and Zabihollāh Safā (1911–1999) held positions that shaped cultural and political strategy and policymaking (Fotuhi 2013, 32–33). On the other hand, as Talinn Grigor states, “as Reza Shah's dictatorship intensified, the most prominent politicians and intellectuals of the time instigated radical reforms through the Society whereby they could veil their most effective political muscle behind a benign cultural veneer” (Grigor 2004, 18). Of course, as Māziyār Behruz explains, many other intellectuals, especially some nationalist figures, did not initially join the state or state-funded cultural foundations as they doubted the “national independence of the Pahlavi regime in its very first steps” (Behruz 2001, 26).

Many of these intellectuals were trained in western academia of the early twentieth century, where the assimilation of oriental subjects into Western culture was promoted. Grigor states that having had the experience of European education, this generation of young Iranians strived to image an “inherently utopian and totalistic universal-modernism for Iran” (Grigor 2004, 20). Indeed, although they were very committed to drawing directly on a repertoire of Iranian culture, they were nonetheless promoting a degree of assimilation into Western culture.

One of the most influential bodies that formed around ideas of assimilation was the Tajaddod (Modernization) parliamentary group. In the fifth Parliament, this group played an important role in the overthrow of Ahmad Shah and, consequently, Reza Shah's enthronement. Shortly after this event, members of Tajaddod formed a group and then a political party named Iran-e Now (New Iran). As Grigor writes, the members devised a set of policies for this parliamentary group, which was “modeled upon that of the Fascists” (Grigor 2004, 21–22). Members of this group later served in several cabinets in the Pahlavi era.

Members of Iran-e Now were also involved in forming an influential non-governmental society named Anjoman-e Āsār-e Melli (the Society for Cultural Heritage). This organization played a significant role in guiding and sponsoring Iranian art as well as supporting the formation of what we today consider the literary canon. They played this role by building monuments to highlight the significance of literary figures, such as Ferdowsi's tomb in Tus and *Maqbarat al-sho'arā* in Tabriz, holding commemoration ceremonies for these figures, as well as publishing the edited manuscripts of classical literary masterpieces.

The Society published several biographies of prominent literary figures that presented figures in such a way as to explicitly support the Society's ideological beliefs. Three of these famous men of letters were Abo 'l-Qāsem Ferdowsi (940–1025), the narrator of ancient Iran and the guardian of the Persian language; Omar Khayyam (1048–1131), a globally renowned scientist and poet with unorthodox comments on Islamic beliefs; and 'Attār of Nishapur (1145–1220), whose mystical works are considered an artistic take on Islam.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, to find the roots of their ideal secular and progressive society, the Society promoted a nationalist approach towards studying, editing, compiling anthologies, and teaching the works of the forefathers of Persian literature. Some believe that although the Society seemed independent from the state in many aspects, it still provided a means of promoting the state's ideology. The Society's support of authoring, translating, and printing books, establishing a library, preserving rare books and manuscripts, and holding book awards. These activities showcased "the view of the members of the association towards the role of books as the most critical and practical media for cultivation, creation of collective identity and spreading the ideology of the sovereignty" (Esmā'ili and Bigdeli 2021, 42).

However, such cultural organizations with a specific political ideology did more than just fund and support literary studies aligned with their views. They also embarked upon long-term projects to cultivate high culture and 'the good taste'. For instance, the Society for Cultural Heritage attempted to formulate a set of new parameters for evaluating cultural products, seeking to encourage both westernization and the revival of the glorious past. Like many other constitutional and post-constitutional intellectuals, members of the Society believed that in order to achieve modernity, one should obliterate the cultural remains of the immediate past, creating room to construct a progressive future. On the other hand, they assumed that there was a collective, intrinsic 'good taste' – very much a product of the glorious cultural history of Iranians – that has been damaged by the degenerate art and literature of the early modern and modern eras. Grigor states that in the lectures and writings of the Society members, one can see "the concept of *Zawq* – translated as the amalgam of 'taste', 'elegance', or 'verve' – was to be 'rediscovered' and 'reclaimed' through a national artistic 'spirit'; intrinsically 'pure', 'authentic', and above all, forgotten" (Grigor 2004, 18).

1 For more details about Anjoman-e Āsār-e Melli's publications refer to: "Fehrest Enteshārāt-e Anjoman-e Āsār-e Melli." 1972. *Yaghmā*, no. 287: 307–309 and "Fehrest Enteshārāt-e Anjoman-e Āsār-e Melli." 1972. *Yaghmā*, no. 288: 376–377.

The Society portrays its purpose as cultivating “public fascination with Iranian scientific and industrial historic heritage”, protecting the fine arts and handicrafts, and preserving “their old style and method” (Grigor 2004, 25). One can see that, in this manifest, the idea of modernity is not based on the development of local science, industry, and art. The Society, and the ideology it supports, do not see an ‘oriental’ society as a counterpart of the West, but rather it conceives the orient as the consumer of the Western knowledge. Instead of encouraging the public to pursue industrialization, the Society focuses on revealing the roots of western knowledge in the history of the orient. For them, preserving the old in response to the Western expectations, rather than creating the new, is the responsibility of oriental society. This idea can be seen in orientalist scholars’ attitude towards the trend of modernism in the first half of twentieth-century Iran. In his speech for a group of Iranian intellectuals and politicians, notable orientalist Arthur Pope praised Iranian handicraft production, while stating that industrialization “often increases power at the expense of happiness” and might cause jealousy and strife (Grigor 2004, 32). He concluded that the “sensuous and the decorative” better fit the oriental environment, while the “technical and scientific” are more suitable to the Western world (ibid). Such narratives are, indeed, a part of the assimilation process, in which the colonizer does not allow the indigenous to claim any kind of knowledge and confines them to uncritical consumption of knowledge created by western society.

Submitting themselves to this colonial arrangement, literary academics of the post-1920s era called cultural activists to revivalism. Said Nafisi, a prominent literary scholar and a member of the Society for Cultural Heritage, writes:

We have aborted all the problems of modern life ... Following its ancestral roots, Iran has once again revived and remains always the nation which has demonstrated the ability to assimilate with the certainty of catching-up with the lost years. Nothing can prevent a nation to arrive at its goals, and those goals are waiting for us (Grigor 2004, 40).

Conceiving modernity as a troublesome phenomenon and a potential threat to Iran’s cultural heritage has been characteristic of most conservative scholars. Similar to the revivalists, who wanted to detach from their immediate past, extremist traditionalists denounced the literary attempts of the forefathers of literary modernism. However, there is a significant difference between these two forces of canon formation. The former denied the immediate past to move towards a promised utopic future, while the latter advocated for a return to the fundamentals of the tradition.

During the 1930s and 1940s, a group of authors established their hegemony in literary scholarship. This group was known as *Odabā-ye Sab'eh* (Seven Men of Letters). According to Mojtabā Minovi, in that period, “there were no magazines, anthologies, and even newspapers published in Persian without containing at least a piece by one of these scholars” (Mir-Ābedini 2017, 27). The members of this group, which eventually exceeded the initial seven members, included Mohammad-Taqi Bahār, ‘Abbās Eqbāl Āshtiyāni (1896–1956), Golām-Rezā Rashid-Yāsami (1895–1951), Sa’id Nafisi, Badi’ al-Zamān Foruzānfar, Nasrollāh Falsafi (1901–1981), ‘Ali-Asghar Hekmat, Hasan Taqizāde, and Mohammad Qazvini. Although in some cases the members showed more flexibility toward contextual reforms in Persian literature, they fundamentally denounced the experiments of their contemporaries in formal aspects of the literary texts. Members of *Sab'eh* considered themselves the guardians of the literary tradition and the preservers of people’s good taste. With the state’s support, these scholars were able to extend their ideological dominance over all academic institutions in the country. They also used non-academic periodicals to voice their objections to any innovations proposed by the younger generation, labeling them as miscomprehensions of the notions of change and progress.

Hasan Vahid Dastgerdi, in his book *Enqelāb-e adabi yā tajadod-e Adabi* (Literary Revolution and Literary Modernization), states that none of his contemporary modernists are “acquainted with literature” at any level, and in turn attempts to show his readers what “literary modernization or literary revolution” means in “its true sense” (Vahid Dastgerdi 1956, 9). He claims that the true revolutionary Persian poets are limited to five: Ferdowsi, Nezāmi, Sa’di, Rumi and Khayyam, as they all established genres of Persian poetry that fundamentally differed from those practiced before them. Furthermore, he adds to this list eight more poets who were not “revolutionaries” but followed the innovations of their poetic fathers in distinctive ways, namely Kamāl al-Din Esmā’il, Anvari, Nāser Khosrow, Zahir al-Din Fāryābi, Farrokhi Sistāni, Hāfez, Sā’eb-e Tabrizi, and Qā’āni (Vahid Dastgerdi 1956, 18). Indeed, once again, in this treatise, the author attempts to shape the literary taste of the reader by single-handedly defining what counts as literary canon. In this attempt, Vahid Dastgerdi dismisses the main characteristics of literary modernization movements, such as innovation and progression, and subsumes them under the works of the classical masters. In doing so, he infers that the changes made by the eight innovative followers of the five ‘fathers’ of Persian poetry are sufficient even to answer the needs of modern society.

Intentional misreading of literary modernization in favor of traditionalism has always been common among Persian literature scholars. This kind of

misreading can happen in two ways. First, as was mentioned, traditionalists tend to argue that classical works can function perfectly in the context of the modern world. I remember, back in 2010, in my first session of the only course on contemporary Persian poetry, the professor started discussion with a poem by Sā'eb-e Tabrizi (1592–1676). When we asked him why we should discuss a poem by a 17th-century poet in a contemporary poetry course, he responded a 'good poem' is timeless and does not fall into the categories of old and new. In fact, he legitimized the study of a classical work in a contemporary literature course due to the freshness he could still sense from the aesthetic aspects of the poem. Harold Bloom believes "literary greatness speaks to the private self and can not be adjudicated by those who, following the herd, choose books for reasons other than their aesthetic power" (Bloom and Mikics 2019, 3).

This professor's perspective reflected not an individual judgment but a collective movement of Persian literature academia toward prioritizing emotional effectiveness evaluated by the aesthetic measures of literary criticism, which, in turn, functions to eventually eliminate contemporary works from the literary canon. One can see the same approach in the words of Mohammad-'Ali Eslāmi Nodushan, where he states that "any work which has been present in the spiritual life of a nation and continues to be influential should be considered new, even if it was created one thousand years ago. That is how the newness in literature and newness in science are different" (Eslāmi Nodushan 1975, 104). Gholām-Hoseyn Yusofi, unlike most of his predecessors, perceived contemporary literature as a natural continuation of classical literature. He has included contemporary poetry and prose in his two anthological works, *Didāri bā Ahl-e qalam* (Meeting with men of letters, 1976) and *Cheshme-ye rowshan* (The Bright spring, 1988). However, he does not include these works to give a voice to contemporary literature, but rather because he is unwilling to categorize literary works as along traditional-modernist lines. Instead, he believes 'good' pieces contain Jowhar-e she'ri (poetic essence) through which he argues readers can evaluate works regardless of their date of creation and their stance on contemporary literary movements (Mir-Ābedini 2017, 54). Creating a vicious circle, another prominent scholar, Abdol-Hoseyn Zarrinkub, states that this poetic essence can only be distinguished by sound and good taste, which in turn can be acquired by an in-depth study of the canon of classical literature. He writes:

The sole criterion that can be used to identify and infer technical rules and principles of literary texts is good taste, which is manifested in literary masterpieces, whether old or new. It is vital for a discerning critic to identify those principles and rules in order to master the techniques of criticism. Apart from that, the poet and writer, even the experimentalists,

cannot escape from learning those principles and rules thoroughly. Only by knowing those fundamentals can one create new works and revise old regulations and principles. That is why writers and critics have always emphasized and recommended studying classical works (Zarrinkub 1960, 78).

On the other hand, these categorizations allow previously overlooked bodies of modern and contemporary literature to be studied alongside classical masterpieces. However, as Aston states, simply adding these works to an existing literature curriculum, including them in research with the same old methodologies, or teaching them using the same approaches applied to traditionally canonical authors is as problematic as excluding them from research and curricula (Aston 2020, 6). There is no point in reading a poem by a modernist poet in class and simply translating the verse into prose for students or asking them to find rhetorical devices employed in the piece. One may argue taking a piece out of its political and aesthetic context and analyzing it in solitude is yet another intentional misreading of academia rooted in the New Critical concept of close reading. New Criticism significantly affected the establishment of the English literary canon in the twentieth century, with advocates calling for a close reading methodology that emphasized the “primacy of the text itself as the focus of literary criticism” (Aston 2020, 5).

Traditionalists have intentionally misread the notion of close reading and its role in teaching and research of literary modernism, resulting in their prioritizing aesthetic conformity with classical rules over innovation and experimentation. For instance, Zarrinkub claims that one should name Mohammad-Taqi Bahār and Mohammad-Hoseyn Shahriyār alongside Nimā as the leading figures of modern literature. He argues that these two traditionalist poets not only have freed their works from the traditional literary language, but they possess a better understanding of the classical principles as well. He notes that, unlike these two poets, many pioneers of Persian literary modernism have composed works that “are not free of rhetorical, compositional, and vocabulary errors” (Zarrinkub 2004, 536).

Scholars who defend this perspective attempt to reduce the notion of literary change into a sense of contemporizing the subject matter and some formal features of literary works. As mentioned, traditionalists argue the Persian literary canon would not be harmed if modern literature were substituted by classical works relevant to contemporary society and the needs of modern life. Having said that, many such traditionalists believe most readers today need help to comprehend classical texts’ response to the issues of modern life, as

they lack the skills to do so independently. Blaming the educational system, Nodushan lists a number of reasons behind the inclination of younger generations to modern literature instead of classical masterpieces. One of these reasons is that the younger generation is not eager to gain the prerequisite knowledge required to comprehend classical literature. Instead, they are inclined to study modern literature as “it is rather a hobby than education”. (Eslāmi Nodushan 1975, 104) He also believes that the younger generation’s inclination to modern literature has a psychological element. First, modern literature tempts them, as it offers a protesting voice and an “unofficial gaze” toward the world. Second, modern literature is “exciting” for a certain age group, and most people above “forty years old” no longer follow modern literature (ibid). According to Fotuhi, this “unofficial gaze” or “the spirit of contradiction”, was the impact of the leftist literary intellectual works that were active outside the universities. This protestation element was the main reason why other forces of canon formation, especially the nationalists, objected to integrating contemporary literary texts into curricula (Fotuhi 2013, 34).

## 5 Literary Historiography Movement

Another strategy for keeping unofficial and resistance literature outside academia was to take control of narratives by writing literary histories in line with the policies and ideologies of the conservative forces of canonization. Many scholars believe that the rise of literary historiography between the 1920s to the 1950s resulted from the attempts of the post-constitutional nationalist revivalists to hegemonize the high culture or ‘the good taste’ they wished for the public. The revivalist ideas were embodied in glorifying the classical forefathers and rejecting the immediate past. This led the history tellers of Persian literature to not only denounce any work created after Abd al-Rahmān Jāmi (1414–1492) but also to celebrate even the weakest authors of the classical literary era in the same way as they praised the greats.

Persian literature has a long history of documenting literary history and biographies of the authors in the form of *Tazkare*. A *Tazkare* is an amalgam of short biographical notices and an anthology of literary texts which are compiled based on either shared characteristics among the included authors (such as their affiliation with a particular court or ideology) or the historical period in which they lived. Although *Tazkares* are considered the primary sources in creating literary histories, they are not the most reliable. Ahmad Golchin Maʿāni states that there are several examples of *Tazkares* in which minor mistakes,



such as the misspelling of a name or an unclear word, has led to a series of major errors in documenting historical information (Golchin Ma'āni 1969, III).

To address such mistakes, the leading scholars of the constitutional and post-constitutional eras attempted to modernize the way Persian literary history was recorded. Mahmud Fotuhi states that Mirzā Mohammad-Hoseyn Forughī Zokā' al-Molk (1832–1907) wrote the first history of Persian literature as a course book for the School of Politics in Tehran and entitled it *Tārikh-e Adabīyyāt* (History of Literature) (Fotuhi 2003, 104). This book was published in 1917, years after the death of the author, almost two years before the publication of 'Abbās Eqbāl Āshtiyāni's article series titled *Tārikh-e Adabi-e Irān* (Literary History of Iran, 1918) in *Dāneshkade* magazine. *Sokhan va sokhanvarān* (Literature and literati, 1929) by Badi' al-Zamān Foruzānfar, Rezāzāde Shafaq's *Tārikh-e Adabīyyāt* (History of Literature, 1942), Mohammad-Taqi Bahār's *Tārikh-e Tatavvor-e she'r-e fārsi* (The History of Persian poetry's development, 1942), and Zabihollāh Safā's *Tārikh-e Adabīyyāt dar Irān* (History of Literature in Iran, 1954–1988) are among the most important literary histories that were created during the literary historiography movement.

According to Fotuhi, the literary historiography movement in Iran was influenced by four prominent literary histories that were written by non-Iranian scholars: The History of Literature by Hermann Ethé (1896), Literary History of Persia by Edward G. Browne (1902), *She'r al-'ajam* by Shebli No'māni (1906), and *Tārikh adab al-lughah al-arabīyya* by Jurji Zaidan (1910–1913) (Fotuhi 2003, 105). However, the literary historiography movement was very much affected by the great work of British orientalist Edward Browne; indeed, Browne's work was the primary model for almost all literary histories written after him. Browne structured his work using a chronological system, presenting literary works as reflections of the socio-political situation and events of their time. Browne's work has not only influenced literary histories written by literary scholars inside Iran but also the works of those who lived and worked in non-Persian-speaking academia. Bozorg Alavi's *Geschichte und Entwicklung der modernen persischen Literatur* (1964) and Hasan Kamshad's *Modern Persian Prose Literature* (1966) are examples of such influence.

The final chapter of Browne's *Literary History of Persia* was the first attempt at a historiography of modern Persian literature. Although he managed to cover a considerable number of his contemporary authors and literary works in a short section, his work lacked a detailed analysis of some significant works and movements of the time. Despite its shortcomings, the Literary History of Persia provided a model for a younger generation of academics, who had more motivation and access to the primary sources needed to form a more

acceptable account of contemporary literature, including poetry, prose, as well as newer forms of fiction, play, and essay writing.

Having said that, most of Browne's successors overlooked an important aspect of his historiography: Browne included a fairly comprehensive report on his contemporary attempts to modernize Persian literature in the fourth volume of his book. He also authored another book entitled *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia* (1914), which was an anthology and report on the most significant works of post-constitutional poetry. In this latter book, Browne included political poetry and experimental poetic works of his contemporaries, using the term 'literary revolution' to collectively describe them. He has compiled and translated sixty poems previously published in one of the popular journals during and after the constitutional revolution. Browne, in his letter to Taqizāde, writes that after completing this book, he was going to translate a more significant number of contemporary prose and poetry works, as he finds such translation a 'major task which is highly essential' (Javādi 2017, 425–426). He admires the contemporary Persian poetry of the time, which was yet to be recognized as an epoch-making and innovative literary movement. He also compares these inventive works with the works of their contemporary Western poets such as Alice Milligan (1865–1953) and W.B. Yeats (1865–1939):

In Persia some four centuries later (early eleventh century of the Christian era) the great Firdawsi displays in the "Epic of the Kings" or Shah-nama something of the same spirit of pride in his nation and race and that love of heroic deeds and high achievements which the Arabs call Hamasa. Such poetry in ancient times is, however, so far as my studies go, always of the triumphant, victorious and imperialistic type; while of the more subtle and moving patriotic verse of the conquered and helpless nation (that verse wherein Ireland stands supreme'), which can only strive to maintain its spiritual life under the more or less galling yoke of the foreign invader, and must sustain its sense of nationhood by memories of a glorious past and hopes of a happier future, there is hardly a trace in Persian or Arabic until this present century (Browne and Tarbiyat 1914, xxxiii).

On the contrary, most of the literary histories authored during the literary historiography movement overlooked the literary activities of their own time. In some cases, they denounced their contemporaries as a deviation from the glorious classical literature. That is to say, even if the authors of these works mention a part of the modernist literary movements and its authors, discussion

would be limited to the most influential figures of constitutional literature and modernist giants such as Sādeq Hedāyat (1903–1951) and Nimā Yushij (1895–1960).

Even the works created in non-Persian-speaking academic environments, which have a more inclusive approach towards modern literature, were not welcomed by Iranian academics. Alavi and Kamshad's books were not translated into Persian for decades and were never used or taught in the Persian literature programs of Iranian universities. Alavi's work, written as a textbook on modern Persian literature for German-speaking students, covered the literary movements up to the 1950s. Kamshad went further, and his work, originally his Ph.D. dissertation, covered most of his prominent contemporary authors up to the 1960s. The genres covered – namely Alavi's emphasis on short stories and Kamshad's analysis of journalism and playwriting – is the principal distinction between the works of these scholars and their counterparts in Persian-speaking academia. Indeed, the Iranian academics assumed these genres of literature to be inferior and attempted to close down all new prospects for literary studies influenced by such thinking by banning any criticisms of the canon from their teaching and research.

## 6 Faculty of Persian Literature Curriculums

Aston writes, “the literary canon has a complicated historical relationship with the teaching of literature, and understanding the story of one means understanding the story of the other” (Aston 2020, 42). The first faculty of Persian Literature was established in 1920 as a department of Dār al-Mo'alemin-e Markazi (the Central Teacher Training Institute). In 1929 Dār al-Mo'alemin-e 'Āli (the Supreme Teacher Training Institute) was added to the Dār al-Mo'alemin-e Markazi, which eventually led to the branching of the latter into two departments, one of literature and one of science. Five years later, in 1934, Dār al-Mo'alemin-e 'Āli changed its name to Dāneshsarā-ye 'Āli (the Supreme Academy) (Dāneshsarā-ye 'Āli 1945, 1–2). After establishing the School of Literature and Humanities at the University of Tehran, both institutions were overseen by the same office. However, the official merger of the two institutions did not happen until 1959 (Dāneshkade Adabiyāt 1967, 9).

As a result of individual works, the activities of cultural establishments, and the literary historiography movement, the Persian literary canon was more or less established prior to the formation of Iran's literary research institutes. That is to say, from their very first stages, Persian literature programs at the country's leading universities were designed centered around a particular set

of works. However, the modules engaging the texts gradually changed over the first few decades. Looking at the bachelor program at the University of Tehran during the first few decades of its establishment, one can see that the programs evolved from offering courses with broad subject matters such as ‘Research in literary texts’ towards more specific and inclusive ones such as those that focused on reading particular texts (e.g., *Shāh-nāme*, *Golestān* and so on). The table presented below is extracted from the bachelor’s degree curriculum of the Faculty of Persian Literature at the University of Tehran, pertaining to the academic year 1958–1959. This table, which will be analyzed in the subsequent paragraphs, provides a list of the 22 mandatory courses encompassing subjects such as Grammar, Stylistics, Rhetoric, Literary History, Ancient Persian Language, Arabic Language, Arabic Literature, Criticism, English, Research Methodologies, and Academic Writing.

**۹ - رشته زبان و ادبیات فارسی**

ردیف	نام درس	شماره درس	تعداد واحد	نام درس	شماره درس	تعداد واحد	نام درس	شماره درس
۱	—	—	—	—	—	—	دستور زبان فارسی	۱۰۱
۲	—	—	۳	سبک‌شناسی (نثر)	۲۰۲	۳	سبک‌شناسی (نظم)	۱۰۲
۳	تحقیق در متون فارسی و آئین نگارش	۳۰۳	۲	تحقیق در متون فارسی و آئین نگارش	۲۰۳	۲	تحقیق در متون فارسی و آئین نگارش	۱۰۳
۴	—	—	—	—	—	—	صناعات ادبی فارسی و عربی (معانی و بیان عروض - قافیه بدیع و انواع شعر)	۱۰۴
۵	—	—	۲	تاریخ زبان فارسی	۲۰۵	۲	تاریخ زبان فارسی	۱۰۵
۶	تاریخ ادبیات فارسی	۳۰۶	۳	تاریخ ادبیات فارسی	۲۰۶	۳	تاریخ ادبیات فارسی	۱۰۶
۷	—	—	—	—	—	—	زبان و ادبیات اوستایی و فارسی باستانی	۱۰۷
۸	—	—	—	—	—	—	زبان پهلوی	۱۰۸
۹	—	—	۳	زبان عربی	۲۰۹	۳	زبان عربی	۱۰۹
۱۰	—	—	۲	ادبیات عرب	۲۱۰	۲	ادبیات عرب	۱۱۰
۱۱	—	—	—	—	—	—	سخن‌سنجی	۱۱۱
۱۲	—	—	۳	زبان خارجه	۲۱۲	۳	زبان خارجه	۱۱۲
۱۳	—	—	—	—	—	—	جمع	۲۸

FIGURE 18.1 The Bachelor’s degree curriculum of the Faculty of Persian Literature at the University of Tehran for the academic year 1958–1959.

One can clearly see the influence of academics with religious and seminary backgrounds in the courses, which can be understood as the remaining influence of the traditional seminary educational system in the modern departments of literary studies. [Quranic] Arabic language and Classical Arabic literature as mandatory courses and Islamic philosophy as an elective course are examples of seminary modules in this program that are still among the courses offered by Persian literature departments.

As for the present chapter, a more critical point about this program is that due to the dominance of the traditionalist approach among academics of the 1920s–1960s, modern literature again played a minor role in this curriculum. The only course that could potentially include the first phase of literary modernism is Literary History 3, where the professors could touch upon constitutional literature. On the other hand, courses such as *Sokhan Sanji* (literary criticism, lit. “measuring words”) as a mandatory course and Aesthetics, Linguistics, Western literature, and Sociology as elective courses were designed to familiarize students with modern methods of literary analysis. The Ph.D. program also contains subjects for similar purposes, such as the Art of Theater, Introduction to English Literature, Sociology, and Aesthetics (Dāneshkade Adabiyāt 1958, 39–41). One may argue these courses showcase the contradictory nature of this program, which in turn is rooted in the paradox of traditionalism and modernism within the state-supported idea of revivalism. According to Mir-Ābedin, although academic research on classical literature was in debt to modern literary theories and criticism, in terms of approach and methodology Persian academia considered modern works deviations from the rich classical literature (Mir-Ābedini 2017, 2).

There are a few differences between the Persian literature program at the University of Tehran versus at other leading universities of the time. Almost the same bachelor’s programs are offered in *the Isfahan Faculty of Persian Literature Guidebook* for 1962 and *the Tabriz Faculty of Persian Literature Yearbook* for 1952. The latter, however, provides a more detailed program to the reader. For instance, for the Literary History module, the program shows that the lectures would not cover literary movements after 1907 (Dāneshkade Adabiyāt-e Tabriz 1952, 157). Even pre-constitutional literature would not be studied until the final section of the eighth part of this module, meaning that the lecturer would not spend more than a session on this topic. Having said that, the History of Arabic Literature module offered at the Tabriz Faculty of Persian Literature moved away from its seminary origin and covered the Arabic literary movements until after the 1919 Egyptian revolution (Dāneshkade Adabiyāt-e Tabriz 1952, 161).

The majority of faculty members in the first couple of decades after the establishment of the Persian literature program in Tehran were scholars best known for their research in classical literature, such as ‘Abbās Eqbāl Āshtiyāni (1896–1956), Mohammad-Taqi Bahār, ‘Ali-Asghar Hekmat, Gholām-‘Ali Ra’di Āzarakshī (1909–1999), Sādeq Rezāzāde Shafaq (1892–1971), Fāteme Sayyāh, Zabihollāh Safā, Badi’ al-Zamān Foruzānfar, Mirzā ‘Abd al-‘Azim Khan Qarib, Mohammad Mo’in (1914–1971), and Jalāl al-Din Homā’i.

There were also a few faculty members who had shown some interest in literary modernization, such as Parviz Nātel Khānlari, Gholām-Rezā Rashid-Yāsami, Lotf-‘Ali Suratgar (1900–1969), and Sa’id Nafisi (1966). However, one may categorize this group as moderate modernists (as opposed to high modernists) who believed in a gradual departure from the traditions towards literary modernism. Indeed, more radical modernists, such as the advocates of Nimāic poetry or other experimentalist writers, did not have a voice in the academic environment of the time. For instance, Mohammad Moqaddam (1909–1997), considered a radical experimentalist poet, was not involved with designing and delivering any literary courses and exclusively taught modules on Ancient Iranian Languages (*Dāneshkade Adabiyāt va Dāneshsarā-ye ‘Āli* 1945, 12–25).

Mir-Ābedini argues that it was not until after the first half of the 1960s that academics felt the necessity to include contemporary literature in their departments’ programs. He credits moderate faculty members such as Parviz Nātel Khānlari, ‘Abdol-Hoseyn Zarrinkub (1923–1999), Mohammad-‘Ali Eslāmi Nodushan (1924–2022), Mohammad-Reza Shafi’i-Kadkani (1939–), and Gholām-Hoseyn Yusofi (1928–1990) for paving the way by designing courses focused on modern Persian literature. Indeed, the first contemporary literature course was designed and delivered in 1969 at the School of Humanities and Persian Literature, University of Tehran (Mir-Ābedini 2017, 73).

## 7 The First Textbooks for Modern and Contemporary Literature

Mohammad Este’lāmi’s *Shenākht-e Adabiyāt-e Emruz* (Acquainting with Today’s Literature) is probably the first Modern Persian literature textbook to be used in Iranian academia. In 1968, Este’lāmi was asked by Mo’assese-ye ‘Āli-ye matbu’āt va ravābet-e omumi (today’s Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tehran) to write this book. Este’lāmi has divided his book into nine chapters; except for the first chapter, which functions as a concise introduction to classical Persian literature, and the last chapter, which is dedicated

to children's literature, other chapters include historical analysis of literary forms (prose, poetry, drama, and critique) during two main periods: the constitutional era and the contemporary time.

Each chapter contains a brief history of literary movements and their central figures. That is to say, by creating historical accounts for each movement and its prominent literary figures, particularly those contemporary to the author, Este'lāmi suggests a literary canon of his time. For instance, in chapter 4 on "story writing in the Persian language", he goes further than writing about established figures such as Mohammad-'Ali Jamālzāde (1892–1997) and Sādeq Hedāyat. He also names and analyses the works of some of his contemporaries, such as Jalāl Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) and 'Ali-Mohammad Afghāni (1925–). However, when it comes to poetry, Este'lāmi, like many other conservative academics of the time, prefers not to name any contemporary modernist poets. In other words, he refuses to integrate his contemporary poets into the official narrative he is creating. Instead, in this chapter of the book, he discusses the development of classical poetic forms and their move toward the newer poetic forms of modern poetry without focusing on any influential figures.

Este'lāmi later compiled an anthology entitled *Adabīyyāt-e dowre-ye bidāri va mo'āser* (Literature of the awakening and contemporary era, 1977) to be taught at Dāneshgāh-e Sepāhiyān Enqelāb-e Irān (Revolution Army of Iran University), in which he includes some examples of his contemporary poets such as Mehdi Akhavan Sāles (1929–1990), Ahmad Shāmlu (1925–2000), and Forugh Farrokhzād (1935–1967). However, in his introduction to this section, Este'lāmi tries to legitimize the presence of contemporary poetry in his narrative by emphasizing the roots of modern Persian poetry in classical literature:

Only common people assume that poetry is exclusively rhythmic and rhyming words [...] A text may have rhythm and rhyme but still appears meaningless. Even Nasir al-Din Tusi (1201–1274) did not consider such words as poetry. In our time, Nimā Yushij's argument [about a poem's formal aspects] corresponds to that of Nasir al-Din Tusi. Indeed, it should be clearly stated that the outline of Nimā's innovation can be found in the treatises of thinkers since the 13th century, and Nimā's masterwork is that he could implement this idea in today's poetry (Este'lāmi 1977, 348).

Este'lāmi, like many other scholars, has tried to show that the traditional rhetorical system and tools for critically analyzing texts are still valid, even if the case study is a modern work. Similarly, Khosrow Farshādivard believes that, despite the fact that traditional western rhetoric is now considered

outdated by modernist critics, the Arabic and Persian rhetorical systems are perfectly capable of analyzing modern texts. He states that even the works of high-modernists such as Forugh Farrokhzād and Akhavān Sāles can and should be analyzed using “traditional rhetorical measures”. (Farshādivard 1994, 384–385)

Este'lāmi attempts to convince the students who are the addressees of this book that although Nimāic poetry is a break from the traditional regulations of poetry, one can only comprehend Nimā's revisionary approach toward the classical poetics by analyzing his work by traditional rhetorical measures. He also clarifies that innovation in poetry must have boundaries. So, while explaining that rhyme arrangements can be subject to fundamental reform, he strongly believes that prose-poetry is a backward literary form as prosody is never a limitation in expressing new ideas. That is why he cannot accept the experimentalists and Avant-guard poets of his time as part of the literary studies curriculum. For instance, in this very introduction, he refuses to see the work of many young poets as the continuation of Nimāic poetry and even denounces controversial modernist literary movements of the time, such as Mowj-e now (New wave) (Este'lāmi 1977, 349–351).

Indeed, Este'lāmi proposes a reform from within the literary canon by conditionally accepting neo-classics and Nimāic modernists while denouncing experimentalism and avant-gardism. In doing so, he attempts to save ‘the good taste’ of students from the deviation of unofficial literature outside of the walls of the universities, where non-academic authors and journalists were forming new literary movements and shaping a new literary taste in younger generations of readers.

## 8 Conclusion

Since the beginning of the teaching of literature in the first modern higher education institutes of 1920s Iran, some particular literary works have been considered worthy of being taught, and many others, particularly modern and contemporary works, have been rejected as resources for teaching and research. Conferring teachable value to literary texts and creating literary canons has been practiced by different groups of academics with different ideological intentions. The present chapter has sought to determine the effect of various forces of canon formation and their influence on literary studies curricula. This chapter has also analyzed the strategies conservative academics have taken to exclude modern and contemporary literature from the curricula of the Persian Literature departments in the first half of the twentieth century.



This chapter categorizes the forces of canon formation during the first few decades of the establishment of modern academia into three main groups: nationalist, religious, and leftist. Unlike the leftists, who were suppressed by both the state and the other two groups, nationalists and religious academics played a significant role in developing the notion of revivalism as the most significant cultural project of the Pahlavi state. Nationalists and religious scholars of this era developed various strategies to demonstrate the potential threat of modern and contemporary literature to 'the good taste' of Iranian readers and, eventually, Iran's sacred cultural heritage.

From the perspective of these groups, good taste equaled the conscience in intellectual matters. They believed the literary canon, as a set of good texts, functions not only as a model of excellence in writing but also as a knowledge that one ought to cultivate in order to become a better person. Thus, classical literary texts, particularly those with national or moral subject matters, were considered 'sacred' and the faculties of literature were seen as gatekeepers of this national and spiritual heritage. On the other hand, modern and contemporary works were excluded from the materials used by institutions to educate the younger generation, due to their anti-traditional nature.

In addition, some state-funded and independent cultural establishments attempted to find the roots of their ideal society in classical masterpieces. As such, by implementing comprehensive programs for studying, publishing, and teaching a specific set of classical works, organizations such as the Anjoman-e Āsār-e Melli (the Society for Cultural Heritage) and the Odabā-ye Sab'eh (Seven Men of Letters) forum tried to establish a particular narrative of Persian literary history.

Another strategy for keeping the unofficial contemporary literature outside academia was taking control of narratives by writing literary histories in line with the policies and ideologies of the conservative forces of canonization. The trend of literary historiography between the 1920s to the 1950s was a part of the project of cultural revivalism to hegemonize 'the good taste' that conservative academics wished for the public.

Intentional misreading of literary modernization in favor of traditionalism provided yet another way of discarding modern and contemporary works from the official canon. These misreadings aimed to show that classical works could function perfectly in the context of the modern world while contemporary literature was too weak in terms of content and aesthetics to answer the demands of modern Iranians.

In its final part, this chapter briefly analyzed a Persian Literature curriculum sample from the first steps of establishing modern universities. It then

presented a concise overview of the first modern and contemporary Persian literature textbook for university teaching. In these last sections, the chapter sought to showcase the implementation of the aforementioned strategies – including misreading modernism, conservative historiography, and ethical justifications – in the design of curricula and creation of textbooks for Persian literary studies of the time.