An Introductory Study of the Causes of the Absence of Literary Theory and Literary Criticism in Iran

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Abstract
Since the advent of modernity in Iran, our encounter with ancient Persian literature has changed. Theories and methods of criticism, through translations from western sources entered our scientific and literary space and led to a range of reactions from pure submission to confrontation between literary scholars. A group of scholars assert that what is nowadays known in Western literature as literary theory and criticism existed in our ancient literary tradition, and that without theoretical support, it was not possible to create literary works in Persian. Therefore, what Western thinkers put forward has already been expressed by our thinkers centuries ago. The present article aims to question and criticize this approach. It argues that the possibility of the formation of the theory and system of literary criticism did not exist because these phenomena are the direct products of modernity, the scientific encounter of modern man with all manifestations of existence, and the outcome of the separation of “literary creativity” from the “science of literature.” The critical thinking developing in the Islamic world in the fields of religion, rhetoric and philosophy never penetrated literature, as literature did not receive serious attention from political authorities. Moreover, many Iranian poets disapproved of rationality and took poetry to be rooted in divine inspiration, thus making literary criticism impossible. This article presents seven reasons for the absence of literary theory and criticism in Iran.

Keywords: Literary Theory, Literary Criticism, Iranian Literary Criticism, Western Literary Criticism and Theory

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction
Since the dawn of modern Iranian history, new phenomena, such as the educational system in the form of “university” and “modern education”, have revolutionized our lifestyle. Academic education, developing with the establishment of Dar Al-Fonoon (1851), Daneshsara-ye Aali (Center for Higher Education) (1933) and the University of Tehran (1934), and also the Press System have treated Persian literature in a new way, allowing for “literary education and training critics”, “textual revisions”, “descriptive writing on texts”, “anthologizing literature”, and “literary theory and criticism”.

2. Theoretical Framework
This article examines the presence or absence of literary theory and criticism in Iranian cultural tradition. It is argued that literary theory and criticism entered Iranian cultural tradition with the advent of modernity in Iran and thus it cannot be traced in the cultural tradition of pre-modern Iran. By examining the causes of the absence of literary theory and criticism in the Iranian cultural tradition, the present article tries to pave the way for discussions in this regard.

3. Methodology
This article examines the presence or absence of literary theory and criticism in Iran by adopting a critical approach. First, attempt is made to find out whether or not any systematic pattern for the assessment of Persian literature existed, especially during its various notable phases of literary creation and development. Then, the political, cultural and scientific structure necessary for the development of literary theory and criticism will be examined and the question as to whether the social condition of Iran allowed for the development of an organized critical system will be discussed.
4. Findings and Discussion

Although literary theory and criticism can be traced back to the classical era, it is mostly a modern development formed during the Enlightenment Era. After renaissance, literature was studied as an investigable object and attention was directed from metaphysics to the physical world, and with literature focusing on life itself, writers and poets changed into commentators on social life. Literary theory and criticism developed in such a setting, and with the development of academia, literature gained the focal point in scientific and critical discussions. In Iran this process never started in pre-modern Iran and the only criterion to assess literature was rhetoric, which adopted a “prescriptive-educative” approach to poetry.

The critical thinking developing in the Islamic world in the fields of religion, rhetoric and philosophy never penetrated literature, as literature did not receive serious attention from political authorities, and Iranian poets and writer showed no interest in discussions opened up by philosophers. Most Iranian poets disapproved of rationality and found poetry rooted in divine inspiration, making literary criticism impossible.

5. Conclusions

Literary theory and criticism are absent in pre-modern Iran and it seems that the attempt made by some scholars to find similarities between the ideas of some Muslim rhetoricians and theologians and Western critical theories has been mostly out of patriotic feelings. The absence of literary theory and criticism in pre-modern Iran is by no means a sign of cultural weakness. Theories are products of human efforts to deal with social, political and economic challenges, and in pre-modern Iran, the social background did not contribute to the formation of such theories.

Keywords: Literary Theory, Literary Criticism, History of Iranian Literary Criticism, Western Literary Theory and Criticism

Bibliography


