

Mehmud Beg Tarzi: a Precursor of Modern Novel in Afghanistan

Dr. Irfan Ali Shah*

Dr. Kiran Saneen**

Abstract:

Modern novel in Afghanistan introduced through translations from Turkish into Dari in the early 20th century. The traditional Afghan narrative forms contained no character development, no real narrative progression, and no plot. The narratives were confined to hyperbole, the supernatural and magical events such as fairies. Mehmud Beg Tarzi, the precursor of reform, introduced modern novel in Afghanistan. He was exposed to French literature for two decades (1882-1902) in Damascus and Istanbul, witnessed the Ottoman nationalist-revivalist movement, while, the Young Turk writers shaped his social and political thought. Influenced much by the European culture and institutions, he was compelled to introduce reforms in his native country, Afghanistan. He founded, edited, *Sirajul Akhbar* (1911-1918), the pioneer newspaper of Afghanistan, and published French novels of Jules Verne and Xavier de Montpin including other modern prose writings that carried realism. For Tarzi, realism in prose was the key for reform in his native country. The introduction of modern novel eclipsed the traditional fictional narrative technique prevalent in Afghanistan. This article attempts to examine the penetration of modern novel into Afghanistan. The methodology used in the article is textual analysis.

Keywords: Traditional Afghan Narrative, Modern Novel, *Sirag UI Akhbar*.

Mehmud Tarzi, an enlightened, moderate and precursor of reform, introduced modern prose and journalism in Afghanistan. He spent 23 years of his early life abroad, mostly in Damascus and Istanbul. He translated many books from Ottoman Turkish into Dari.¹His father,

* Assistant Professor of English Qurtaba University Peshawar

** Assistant Professor GGDC, Tajo Bibi Charsadda

Ghulam Muhammad Tarzi was a poet. Tarzi got the pen name *Tarzi* (the stylist) from his father. His father, known to be erudite and outspoken, led his family to exile when Amir Abdur Rehman bore a grudge against him on helping Sardar Ayub Khan (the Amir's foe) in the battle in 1880. His family deported to Fort Abdullah, from where they moved to Karachi, and subsequently, travelled to the Ottoman Empire, where they settled in Damascus. Damascus and Istanbul, considered a hotbed of late 19th century Muslim reformist activities, Tarzi spent most of his time there. For a period of two decades, Tarzi was exposed to French literature. He witnessed the Ottoman nationalist-revivalist movement and received Pan-Islamic views of Jamal-ud-Din Afghani.² The *Young Turk Writers* shaped his social and political thought.³ After exile in 1902, he returned to Afghanistan with his family. Influenced much by the European culture and institutions, he embarked upon a program of reforms in Afghanistan, for that purpose, he was appointed by the Amir Habibullah (r.1901-1919)⁴ as head of *Bureau of Translation* for the royal court; and his job was to keep the Amir informed about events in the Muslim world and Europe. Being a ruler of a country, the Amir was keen to know the modern technological happenings in the advanced societies. Subsequently, Tarzi, the founder and editor of *Siraj-ul-Akhbar*⁵ (1911-1918) published in Persian domestic and foreign news, that carried translations of stories appeared in the English, Urdu, Turkish, and Arabic press. It also included reproduced articles from Persian newspapers and journals.⁶

Traditional Dari Narratives

Tarzi preferred realism than fantasy in novel. He seriously read and probed the traditional Dari narrative forms, "*hikayah*", and "*afsanah*".⁷ Traditional Dari prose fiction included the format of "*Tellers of tales and conveyers of events inform us that, once upon a time, during the reign of so-and-so a caliph, in such-and-such a city, there lived a merchant who...*". The story continued with no interruption and no real narrative progression. It contained no character development and no attempt at creating a clear narrative space. Popular verse fiction in Dari followed the same presentation. It began with lofty, philosophical contemplation, using highly metaphorical language. Little attempt was made to develop the plot,⁸ or delving into the

treatment of character. In traditional narrative, the narrator is omnipresent voice, with no attempt to creating *cause and effect* relationships in the events, or the idea of individuality and personality found in the modern novel. In order to offer aesthetic pleasure, the classical authors endowed the masses, hyperbole, extraordinary, supernatural and magical things, such as fairies, and making them fly like birds. Tarzi found the popular, oral, and polyvalent narratives as the antithesis of modern narratives. It corrupted the masses.⁹

Tarzi was the first to advocate prose as a viable medium for literature.¹⁰ The place occupied by love, beauty, wine, and flowers in classical Dari poetry offended his sensibilities as an advocate of modern education: colonialism, patriotism, progress, and technology were to provide the alternative key symbols of the new literature.¹¹ In *Mahmud-namah*, the poem “*Bugzasht-u-raft*” (It is over), highlights Tarzi’s manifesto for the end of the poetry. It begins importance of narrative prose in the Dari literature in Afghanistan. There exists a paradoxical well-crafted literary schema expressed in the poem for abolishing the poetry. Here are some of the verses of the poem translated from Dari into English;

“The time for poetry and versification is over

The time for magic and sorcery is over

The telegraph connects East and West

The age of travelling messengers is over

A metallic rod is the modern harbinger

Listen to the telephone; the time of speechlessness is over¹²”

Tarzi, the Advocate of Realism

For Tarzi, realism in novel is more comforting, relaxing and delightful than reading fantastic fiction. As reality overwhelms fantasy, therefore, only literary realism could claim adequately capturing the truth. For these reasons, Tarzi insisted on importing European genres such as

“*ruman*”¹³ or “*novul*” (novel) in the literature of Afghanistan, because, they reflected realism. Tarzi, an avid reader of 19th century European novel, translated a number of such works from Turkish into Dari. Such as, novels of Jules Verne and of the lesser known writer, Xavier de Montpin’s novel, *Les Viveurs de Paris*.¹⁴ Tarzi wrote, during his exile, a number of books on a variety of subjects such as,

1. “*Majmoa-e-Sanaie* (The collection of Arts-written in 1883)
2. *Gozidahai e az Sherhai* G.M. Tarzi (An Anthology of Forgotten Poetry of G.M. Tarzi-1886)
3. *Majmoa e Akhlaq* (The collection of Ethics-written in 1888)
4. *Siahatname e Dar e Sahadat* (Travel to the court of Lucky-1888)
5. *Az Har Daham Sokhan e waaz Harchaman Saman e* (From Every Mouth, an Expression and from Every Green, a Meadow-published in 1913)
6. *Rawzah e Hekam* (The Garden of Wisdoms, Knowledge and Philosophies-1890)
7. *Siahatname e She Qetah e Rui e Zamindar 29 ruz, Asya, Orupa, Afriqa* (Travel Account of Three continents of Earth in 29 days, Asia, Europe and Africa-published in 1915)
8. *Dibacha e Divan Ghulam Muhammad Tarzi* (Preface to the collection of Poetry of Ghulam Muhammad Tarzi-1892)”.¹⁵

Amongst the above, *Siahatname e Dar e Sahadat*, and *Siahatname e She Qetah e Rui e Zamindar 29 ruz, Asya, Orupa, Afriqa* are the travelogues, written by Tarzi in 1888 and in 1891 respectively.

Translation of Foreign Novels

After exile, following his appointment as in-charge of *Bureau of Translation*, Tarzi began translating numerous books including novels; the main task of Tarzi was to inform and satisfy the Amir’s interest to happenings within the Muslim world and Europe.¹⁶ The translation of novels of Jules Verne (1828-1905)¹⁷ was another of Amir’s private interests.¹⁸ *Tragedies of Paris*, originally written in 1876, was the first French novel Tarzi translated from among the works of

Xavier de Montépin (1823-1902).¹⁹These translations became the source of inspiration for the first Afghan novel.²⁰ Novels of Jules Verne translated from Turkish into Dari included : *Siahatdar Jaw e Hawa*(A Journey to the Centre of the World)²¹, *BistHazar Fasrakh SihatatZer Bahr* (Twenty Thousands Leagues Under the Sea)²², *SiahatDaurradaur e Kore ye ZaminbaHashtadRuz*(A Trip Around the World in Eighty Days), and *Jazira e Penhan or QazaZadagan e balun* (The Hidden Island).²³Besides, the Urdu translation of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*(1719) was the first western literary work translated into Dari by Sher Ali.²⁴

According to Ashraf Ghani, Tarzi, who translated novels for the pleasure of king, were referred as technical novels. Tarzi justified their publication as a guide to the knowledge of world geography. Ghani further articulated that the books appealed to the Afghan readers due to the fantastic dimension, a quality much in tune with the structure of fairy tales.²⁵ Thus, Tarzi, familiarized with the western novel, and advocating prose as viable medium for literature, has been the precursor of novel writing tradition in Afghanistan. Tarzi was the first Afghan who introduced western novel into Afghanistan in translated form. Novel writing in English have also a great bearing on the novel in Afghanistan. Novels in English, set in Afghanistan, have been written largely by non-Afghans.

Conclusion:

Novel in Afghanistan appeared in translated form in the early 20th century. Prior to that, the traditional Dari narrative forms contained no character development, no real narrative progression, and no plot. The presentation was hyperbole, extraordinary-supernatural-magical events such as fairies. Mehmud Beg Tarzi, the precursor of reform in Afghanistan found these narratives as antithesis of modern novel. His exposition to French literature for two decades (1882-1902) in Damascus and Istanbul, the eye-witness of *Ottoman nationalist-revivalist movement* and, acquaintance with *The Young Turk writers* compelled him to search realism in prose. Therefore, he preferred realism than fantasy in the novel. For him, realism in novel is more comforting, relaxing, and delightful and can help to capture the truth. Keeping realism in mind, Tarzi translated French novels of Jules Verne and of Xavier de Montpin such as, *Siahatdar Jaw e Hawa* (A Journey to the Centre of the World), *BistHazarFasrakhSihatatZer Bahr* (Twenty Thousands Leagues Under the Sea), *SiahatDaurradaur e Kore ye ZaminbaHashtadRuz* (A Trip Around the World in Eighty Days), and *Jazira e Penhan or QazaZadagan e balun* (The Hidden Island) and the *Tragedies of Paris*. He also wrote his two travelogues such as, *Siahatname e Dar e Sahadat*, and *Siahatname e She Qetah e Rui e Zamindar 29 ruz, Asya, Orupa, Afriqa*. Tarzi published these works/novels in *SirajulAkhhbar* (1911-1918). The Afghan fiction writers followed the path of realism found in the modern novel. They began depicting character development, plot construction, and realism. The writers portrayed indigenous stories with life and blood characters. Subsequently, the first Afghan novel in Dari, *Jihad-e-Akbar*, appeared in 1919, while, the first Afghan novel in Pashto, *Be-TarbiataZoy*, appeared in 1939. Successively, numerous novels appeared in Afghanistan in the indigenous languages in the 20th century that depicted social realism.

¹Khan, S, Afridi, S., *Works of Mehmud Beg Tarzi: The Precursor of Reform in Afghanistan*. Central Asia Journal No.62. Area Study centre (Russia, China & Central Asia), University of Peshawar Summer-2008.

²Known as Syed Jamal Uddin Afghani Asadabadi, commonly known as Al-Afghani (1838/39-1897), he was a political activist and Islamicideologist in the Muslim world during the late 19th century, particularly in the Middle East, South Asia and Europe. One of the founders of Islamic Modernism and an advocate of Pan-Islamic unity, he has been described as being less interested in minor differences in Islamic jurisprudence than he was in organizing a Muslim response to Western pressure.

³Khan & Afridi, 2008, pp 127-128.

⁴Habibullah Khan was the Emir of Afghanistan from 1901 until 1919. He was born in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, the eldest son of the Emir Abdur Rahman Khan, whom he succeeded by right of primogeniture in October 1901. Habibullah was a relatively reform-minded ruler who attempted to modernize his country. During his reign, he worked to bring modern medicine and other technology to Afghanistan. In 1903, Habibullah founded the *Habibiaschool* as well as a military academy. He also worked to put in place progressive reforms in his country.

⁵Originally *SirajulAkhhbarAfghaniyah* (The lamp of the News of Afghanistan), the first Afghan newspaper published bi-weekly during the period of Amir Habibullah from October 1911 to January 1919. Edited, and contributed chiefly by Mehmud Beg Tarzi, a polyglot Afghan intellectual, this newspaper, played, not only, a great role in journalism and literature, but also, in the development of an Afghan modernist movement. Despite widespread illiteracy at the time, and written in Persian, with an occasional verse in Pashto, the newspaper did not have a large circulation. The paper was essentially accessible to the urban readers of eastern and western Afghanistan. However, the paper had a degree of success; broadening the horizon of the Afghan elites, introducing and acquainting them with modern concepts and developments, and stimulating the development of modern Afghan literature and journalism. *SirajulAkhhbar*, though independent, received official backing. Its first issue contained the topics such as how *Ramadan* and *EidulFitr* were observed in Afghanistan, the information regarding official postings, extracts from foreign newspapers such as Central Asia, Iran, India, Arab countries and Europe, and a promise to publish translation, in future, of a French novel. The closure of *SirajulAkhhbar*, paved the way for opening other newspapers and news digests in Afghanistan, such as, *Aman-e- Afghan* (1919), *Tolu Afghan* (1921), *Anis*(1929), *Islah*(1929), *Kabul, Aryana*, and *Herat*. *Anis* appeared in both Dari and Pashto. It was at this period that Pashto's becoming the official language of the country, was discussed; becoming a heated political issue later on.

⁶Gregorian, V., *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization (1880-1946)*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969, pp 163-64.

⁷Ahmadi, Wali., *Modern Persian Literature in Afghanistan: An Anomalous Visions of History and Form*. Routledge, USA & Canada, 2008, p 54.

⁸Plot refers to the sequence of events inside a story which affect other events through the principle of cause and effect. The causal events of a plot can be thought of as a series of sentences linked by "and so". Plots can vary from simple structures such as in a traditional ballad to complex interwoven structures sometimes referred to as an *imbroglio*. According to Forster, "*The king died, and then the queen died*, is a story, while *The king died, and then the queen died of grief*, is a plot. In 1863, Gustav Freytag, a German writer, advocated a model based upon Aristotle's theory of tragedy. This is now called "Freytag's pyramid," which divides a drama into five parts, and provides function to each part. These parts are: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement.

⁹Ahmadi, 2008, pp 54-56.

¹⁰Dupree, H, N. *Conscription of Afghan Writers: An Aborted Experience in Socialist Realism*. Central Asia survey, Vol 4, No 4, pp 69-87, printed in Great Britain, 1985. Retrieved from http://www.afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/azu/4323/azu_acku_pamphlet_pk6561_i5_d87_1985_w.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y pp 74-75.

¹¹Ghani, A., *The Persian Literature of Afghanistan, 1911-78*. In, *Iqbal, Afghan and Afghanistan*. Chaghatai, I, M. Sang-e-Meel Publications, Lahore, 2004, p 240.

¹²Ahmadi, 2008, pp 53-54.

¹³Abrams, H, M., *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Heinle & Heinle, USA 1999, p 190.

¹⁴Ahmadi, 2008, p 56.

¹⁵Khan & Afridi, 2008, pp 129-133.

¹⁶Khan, Afridi, 2008, p 133.

¹⁷Jules Gabriel Verne was a French novelist, poet, and playwright. Verne was born to bourgeois parents in the seaport of Nantes, where he was trained to follow in his father's footsteps as a lawyer, but quit the profession early in life to write for magazines and the stage. Verne has been the second most-translated author in the world since

1979, ranking between Agatha Christie and William Shakespeare.^[5] He has sometimes been called the "Father of Science Fiction".

¹⁸Rasanayagum, A., *Afghanistan: A Modern History; Monarchy, Despotism or Democracy? The problems of Governance in Muslim Tradition*. I.B.Taurus & Co, Ltd, London, New York 2005, p15.

¹⁹ He was a popular French novelist. The author of serialised novels (feuilletons) and popular plays, he is best known for the 19th-Century best-seller, *La Porteuse de pain (The Bread Peddler)*, which was first published in *Le Petit Journal*, from 1884 to 1889, and underwent many adaptations for theatre, film and television.

²⁰Palat, K, M, Tabyshalieva, A., 2005, pp 877-879.

²¹Ibid., p 135.

²² Verne, J., *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. Bloomsbury Books, London 1994, p 256. (This science-fiction is divided into two parts; each part containing 23 small chapters.)

²³Khan & Afridi, 2008, p 136.

²⁴Sadat, H, M., *The Afghan Experience Reflected in Modern Afghan Fiction (1900-1992)*. Comparative Study of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Duke University Press. Volume 28, No 02. 2008, p 294.

²⁵Ghani, A., *The Persian Literature of Afghanistan, 1911-78*. In, *Iqbal, Afghan and Afghanistan*. Chaghatai, I, M. Sang-e-Meel Publications, Lahore, 2004, p 242.
