

# Persian literature

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After the fifteenth century, the Indian style of Persian poetry (sometimes also called Isfahani or Safavi styles) took over. This style has its roots in the Timurid era and produced the likes of Amir Khosrow Dehlavi, and Bhai Nand Lal Goya

The most significant essays of this era are Nizami Arudhi Samarqandi's «Chahār Maqāleh» as well as Zahiriddin Naar Muhammad Afi's anecdote compendium *Jawami ul-Hikayat*. Shams al-Moali Abol-hasan Ghaboos ibn Wushmgin's famous work, the *Qabus nama* (A Mirror for Princes), is a highly esteemed Belles-lettres work of Persian literature. Also highly regarded is *Siyasatnama*, by Nizam al-Mulk, a famous Persian vizier. *Kelileh va Demneh*, translated from Indian folk tales, can also be mentioned in this category. It is seen as a collection of adages in Persian literary studies and thus does not convey folkloric notions.

Among the major historical and biographical works in classical Persian, one can mention Abolfazl Beyhaghi's famous *Tarikh-i Beyhaqi*, *Lubab ul-Albab* of Zahiriddin Naar Muhammad Afi (which has been regarded as a reliable chronological source by many experts), as well as Ata al-Mulk Juvayni's famous *Tarikh-i Jahangushay-i Juvaini* (which spans the Mongolid and Ilkhanid era of Iran). Attar's *Tadkhirat al-Awliya* («Biographies of the Saints») is also a detailed account of Sufi mystics, which is referenced by many subsequent authors and considered a significant work in mystical hagiography.

The oldest surviving work of Persian literary criticism after the Islamic conquest of Persia is *Muqaddame-ye Shahname-ye Abu Mansuri*, which was written in the Samanid period. The work deals with the myths and legends of *Shahname* and is considered the oldest surviving example of Persian prose. It also shows an attempt by the authors to evaluate literary works critically.



*One Thousand and One Nights* is a medieval folk tale collection which tells the story of Scheherazade, a Sassanid queen who must relate a series of stories to her malevolent husband, King Shahryar (Šahryār), to delay her execution. The stories are told over a period of one thousand and one nights, and every night she ends the story with a suspenseful situation, forcing the King to keep her alive for another day. The individual stories were created over several centuries, by many people from a number of different lands.

The nucleus of the collection is formed by a Pahlavi Sassanid Persian book called *Hazār Afsānah* (Thousand Myths), a collection of ancient Indian and Persian folk tales.

During the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid in the eighth century, Baghdad had



become an important cosmopolitan city. Merchants from Persia, China, India, Africa, and Europe were all found in Baghdad. During this time, many of the stories that were originally folk stories are thought to have been collected orally over many years and later compiled into a single book. The compiler and ninth-century translator into Arabic is reputedly the storyteller Abu Abd-Allah Muhammad el-Gahshigar. The frame story of Shahrzad seems to have been added in the fourteenth century.

### **The influence of Persian literature on World literature**

William Shakespeare referred to Iran as the «land of the Sophy». Some of Persia's best-loved medieval poets were Sufis, and their poetry was, and is, widely read by Sufis from Morocco to Indonesia. Rumi (Maulānā) in particular is renowned both as a poet and as the founder of a widespread Sufi order. The themes and styles of this devotional poetry have been widely imitated by many Sufi poets.

Many notable texts in Persian mystic literature are not poems, yet highly read and regarded. Among those are *Kimiya-yi sa'adat* and *Asrar al-Tawhid*.

Afghanistan and the Transoxiana can claim to be the birthplace of Modern Persian. Most of the great patrons of Persian literature such as Sultan Sanjar and the courts of the Samanids and Ghaznavids were situated in this region, as were writers such as Rudaki, Unsurī, and Ferdowsi. As such, this rich literary heritage continues to survive well into the present in countries like Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.

With the emergence of the Ghaznavids and their successors such as the Ghurids, Timurids and Mughal Empire, Persian culture and its literature gradually moved into the vast Indian subcontinent. Persian was the language of the nobility, literary circles, and the royal Mughal courts for hundreds of years. (In modern times, Persian has been generally supplanted by Urdu, a heavily Persian-influenced dialect of Hindustani.)

Under the Moghul Empire of India during the

sixteenth century, the official language of India became Persian. Only in 1832 did the British army force the Indian subcontinent to begin conducting business in English. (Clawson, p.6) Persian poetry in fact flourished in these regions while post-Safavid Iranian literature stagnated. Dehkhoda and other scholars of the 20th century, for example, largely based their works on the detailed lexicography produced in India, using compilations such as Ghazi Khan Badr Muhammad Dehlavi's *Adat al-Fudhala* Ibrahim Ghavamuddin Farughi's *Farhang-i Ibrahimi*, and particularly Muhammad Padshah's *Farhang-i Anandraj*. Famous South Asian poets and scholars such as Amir Khosrow Dehlavi, Mirza Ghalib and Muhammad Iqbal of Lahore found many admirers in Iran itself.

Persian literature was little known in the West before the nineteenth century. It became much better known following the publication of several translations from the works of late medieval Persian poets, and it inspired works by various Western poets and writers.

- In 1819, Goethe published his *West-östlicher Divan*, a collection of lyric poems inspired by a German translation of Hafiz (1326–1390).

- The German essayist and philosopher Nietzsche was the author of the book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885), referring to the ancient Persian prophet Zoroaster (circa 1700 BCE).

- A selection from Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (935–1020) was published in 1832 by James Atkinson, a physician employed by the British East India Company.

- A portion of this abridgment was later versified by the British poet Matthew Arnold in his *1853 Rustam and Sohrab*.

- The American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson was another admirer of Persian poetry. He published several essays in 1876 that discuss Persian poetry: *Letters and Social Aims, From the Persian of Hafiz, and Ghaselle*.

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