

A HISTORY OF PERSIAN HAIKU

EVA LUCIE WITTE



The first translations of Japanese poetry into Persian appeared in literary magazines in the 1950s. Of these, perhaps most noteworthy were the translations from French by Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980; q.v.) of seven tankas (*Soḡan*, 6:8, 1955, pp. 703-04), a Japanese poetic form from which the haiku emerged as an independent verse. These were later followed by the publication of other translations of haiku (*Soḡan*, 6:9, 1955, pp. 761, translator unknown). Although Sepehri's own poetry cannot be described as renderings of haiku or tanka, the language in some of his poems, in particular in the collection *Šarq-e andub* (*East of sorrow*, 1952), frequently recalls the minimalist simplicity of haiku (*Sarsbar; Ābedi*, p. 34). Among the most extensive Persian translations of this Japanese form is *Hāiku: šer-e žāponi az āgāz tā emruz* (*Haiku: Japanese poetry from the beginning to the present*, 1982), by Aḡmad Šāmlu and 'Askar Pāšā'i. Although several haiku collections have appeared in Persian translation since that time, it is only since the 1990s that haiku has been indigenized and used as a poetic form by Iranian poets.

In 2002, Kāva Gowharin (b. 1955) published his *Hāiku-hā-ye Irāni* (*Persian haiku*). It was followed by the publication of *Ḳodāy-nāmak* (*The Lord's book*), his second haiku collection, in 2006. *Qomri-e gamḡvār dar šāmgāh-e ḡazāni: bezār o yek hāiku-ye Pārsi* (*The sad dove in the autumn eve: One thousand and one Persian haiku*), by Sayyed 'Ali Šālehi (b. 1955) was published in 2008. More ambitiously preoccupied by haiku than many of its other practitioners in Iran, these two poets have interpreted the role and purposes of haiku in different ways, and their compositions are dissimilar in form as well as content. Gowharin has stayed true to the three-line structure of the traditional Japanese haiku, but has not always followed either the 5-7-5 syllabic pattern or the thematic conventions of this migrated genre. Of particular note are some of his latest haiku, in which elements of nature are substituted by urban imagery, and a sardonic tone clouds over the poet's vision:

Jamā'at-e rowšanfekr!
miyān-e dud-e kāfa nešasta-and
ziyārat-e ahl-e qobur āmada-im.
(Gowharin, 2006, p. 46)

(Assembly of intellectuals!
Sitting in the midst of smoke in a cafe
We have come to visit the people of the graves.)

By juxtaposing the bipartite structure of the haiku, and displaying the hidden similarities between oppositional images, Gowharin conveys the undifferentiated unity of nature, and the organic rules governing the cosmic order.

Karkasān-e osteḡvān-ḡ'ār
ranghā rā mifahmand
ranginkamāni dārand bar sinahamāyel
(Gowharin, 2002, no. 45)

(The bone eating vultures
Understand the colours.
There hangs a rainbow from their chests.)

His poetry, which draws out the beauty of nature even in hideous places and objects, resonates strikingly with some of Sepehri's most popular poems:

Man nemidānam ke čerā miguyand asb hayvān-e najibist / kabutar zibāst / Vačerā dar qafas-e
hič kasi karkas nist
(I don't know why they say that the horse is a noble animal, the pigeon is beautiful / And why
nobody keeps a vulture in his cage; Šedā-ye pā-ye āb, 2000, p. 291)

Šālehi, like Gowharin and many others, discards the syllabic limits of the genre. Unlike Gowharin, however, he often maintains the sensations of nature, as well as the imagery and intensity of the moment as essential attributes of his haiku:

Rāh-e šabnam-puš-e kuhestāni
rama-i zir-e baluḡ-e bozorg
be ḡvāb rafta ast.
(Šālehi, p. 2)

(The dew covered mountain road
A herd has gone to sleep
Under the big oak tree.)

Many of his haiku reveal a Persian ambience through the skillful deployment of imagery:

Ba'd az bārān
'aṡr-e berenj o hizom-e nim-suz
yek piyāla čāy, yek piyāla čāy.
(Šālehi, p. 1)

(After the rain
The scent of rice and half burnt wood
A cup of tea, a cup of tea.)

Hamrāb bā bād (*Walking with the Wind*, tr. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak and Michael Beard, Cambridge, 2002), and *Gorg-i dar kamin* (*A Wolf Lying in Wait*, tr. Karim Emami and Michael Beard, Tehran, 2005) are two bilingual haikuesque collections of poetry by 'Abbas Kiarostami (b. 1940), the internationally noted film director, photographer and poet. Although Kiarostami has discovered in Japanese haiku a form that matches the immediacy of his cinematic images (Khazeni, <http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/37/BOOKSKiarostami.htm>), he disregards in most of his poems the traditional three-line limits of the genre:

In jādda
sālḥāst
matruk ast
hanuz nemidānand
golhā-ye vahši-e ḵvodru
(Kiārostami, 2005, p. 167, no. 289)

This road
Has been abandoned
For many years
Though the wild flowers
Do not seem to know

Taht-e ta'qibam
ba sāya-i ke dar kudaki
hambāzi-e man bud
bā man bozorg šod
bā man ḵamida šod
ma-rā ta'qib mikonad
hamčonān
tā gur
(Kiarostami, 2005, p. 172, no. 298).

I am being pursued
by a shadow that was my playmate
in childhood;
it grew up with me,
it grew old with me,
it will continue
to pursue me
to the grave.

However, most of his poems, like the traditional Japanese haiku, distill and deliver the immensity of a particular moment. Their photographic overtone often loads the last line of the poem with a surprising effect or a punch line:

Do māhi-e qezelālā
ḵofta dar kenār-e ham
dar bastar-e sefid-e bošqāb
(Kiarostami, 2005, p. 158, no. 273)

A pair of trout
lying side by side
on the white bed of a serving dish.

The impact of Japanese haiku on Persian poetry, perhaps initially part of a more expansive fascination with Japanese culture and aesthetics, soon evolved into a stylistic challenge to modernist Persian poets who welcomed the brevity and compact formulation of the form, as well as its usually simple, plain language. With the shifting focus of Persian literature from the socio-political concerns of the 1950s and 1960s to subtler, more individual, and more romanticised means of expression through the 1980s and 1990s, haiku has finally established itself as a veritable form in Persian poetry. Several Persian poets have greeted haiku as a nexus, linking Japanese Buddhism and Persian mysticism or neo-Sufism.

Persian haiku poems, diversified as they are in content and form, share distinct qualities, which distinguish them from *še'r-e now* or *še'r-e kutāh*, signaling a break with the formal features of Persian poetry. Although they discard the traditional 5-7-5 syllabic pattern of Japanese haiku, characteristically attributed to the distinct compactness of the Japanese language, they generally follow the three-line pattern of their Japanese progenitor. They convey either the emotion or mood of a moment, or a moralistic, philosophical or religious message, and rarely welcome colloquial language or slang terms.

Persian haiku has already attracted many followers in Iran and elsewhere. Apart from numerous collections of Persian haiku and translations into Persian of haikupoems from other languages (see below), several websites are dedicated to Persianhaiku and function as forums for discussing and exchanging haiku poems (see below).

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