

Secular Writers' Engagement with Religious Tradition in 20th Century Iran: From Undermining to Deconstructing; A Generational Paradigm Shift

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ABSTRACT

The present article is an attempt to conceptually discuss the development of modern secular approaches to religious tradition in contemporary Iran through the lenses of literary works. Throughout the paper, secularism has been understood as in the notion of "changes in the conditions of belief", proposed by Charles Taylor. With José Casanova's reading of Taylor's conception, secularism becomes equivalent to a gradual construction of new and contextually specific images of the self and society, different from European narrative of religious decline. Accordingly, this article revisits the category of the Iranian 'secular' writer by looking into the trajectory of the Iranian literature field and its shifting relation to religion, itself influenced by the change in how secularism is understood within the field, during the 20th century. The paper argues that the 1979 revolution and its aftermath led to a paradigm shift in the writers' conception of secular engagement with the religious tradition when compared with the first and second generation of writers. The first generation of Iranian secular writers mostly undermined the religious tradition as outdated rituals, and the second generation made a return to it as an authentic part of the Iranian identity under the local and global socio-political influences. The third generation went beyond such rejection/embrace narratives, came to see the religious tradition as a constructed cultural legacy, and engaged in re-reading and deconstructing that legacy in new secular ways.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of modern literature is classically understood as a natural consequence of secularization and decline of religion. However, increasingly more scholars tend to distance from such rise and fall narratives, by focusing on literary works to achieve a better understanding of the complexities of the relationship that modern literature has built with religion (Sambrooke, 2018).

In context of the non-European modern literature, revisiting the category of the modern secular writer is even more indispensable. As José Casanova has pointed out, while in Europe the wide-spread decline of religious beliefs has been a natural consequence of modernization, in many other places such as non-western post-colonial societies, processes of modernization or secularization have not led to a straightforward path of religious decline. Relying on Charles Taylor's definition of secular, Casanova suggests that secularism should be understood as *change* in ways "sacred" and "profane" are comprehended in different socio-historical contexts with the advent of modernity and the constant refashioning of the concepts afterwards (Casanova, 2009).

Based on the above-mentioned definition of secularism, this article seeks to revisit the category of the Iranian 'secular' writer by looking into the trajectory of the Iranian literature field and the shifting relation to religious tradition

during the 20th century. Specifically, this article aims to look into examples from three generations of Iranian modern writers throughout the 20th century, until the revolution of 1979 and its afterwards. The period under study is specially of a great importance for understanding the intellectual causes of the formation of an "Islamic" Republic in 1979 out of the secularization attempts of the Pahlavi period.

Furthermore, in case of Iran, literature not only is a cultural medium to study the particularity of the path of Iranian secularism, but also an important identity pillar. The discourse of Iranian identity is largely dependent on Persian language and classical literature which embodies strong religious and mystical motifs content-wise and formally. Therefore, it might be an imperative to focus on literature if we want to revisit secularism in Iran.

This article consists of three parts each looking into a part of the trajectory of the relationship between religious tradition and modern Iranian literature within the historical and social conditions of the period.

In addition to the above-mentioned points, focusing on the dynamism of literary secularism in case of Iran is also beneficial to challenge the rigid dichotomies created by the Islamic Republic's rhetoric in which modern writers are called anti-religious and "westoxified." More importantly, these dichotomies are sometimes reproduced also in academia, where some scholars have emphasized the

non-religious identity of modern writers compared with the Islamic Republic's official discourse.¹ Therefore, another objective of the article would be to insist on the fluidity of the concept of secular and its context: literature field of Iran with its specific socio-political trajectory.

Accordingly, the first part briefly explains the formation of the modern Iranian intellectual and literature at the wake of the constitutional revolution (1906-1911) and the mostly confrontational attitude toward the religious tradition. The second part investigates the dynamics of the relationship between religion and literature field under the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1979). The third and last part follows such relationship under the Islamic Republic covering up until the end of the reform era. (1979-2004). All in all, the aim is providing a full picture from the trajectory of secular thought within the literary field of Iran under socio-political changes in contemporary Iran.

FIRST GENERATION: UNDERMINING

Starting from the 19th century, intellectual trends in Iran have been shaped under the influence of two sources: Western thought and Shi'i thought (Khosrokhavar, 2004). Some scholars consider another source to be the "reconstructed image" from the pre-Islamic era, developed by scholars and accommodated by the Pahlavi period as a base for distinction and construction of the modern conception of Iranian-ness (Mirsepassi, 2017).

The new intellectuals were from the aristocracy or of a clerical background, and introduced new ideas primarily through political, social, and literary magazines and political activism. One of the primary concerns of many of these intellectuals was the concept of Iran "lagging behind the West," despite once being a great civilization (see Malcom Khan, 2002).

In the process of answering this question, the new intellectuals developed a critical view of Iranian traditions such as mysticism and superstitious religious beliefs and lamented the lack of a modern and just system of law and order. Under the significant influence of political liberalism and the prevalence of scientific positivism of the 19th century, some of them saw the Western path and French enlightenment as the ultimate ideal for Iran, and therefore, started to define their position differently from the last generation of Iranian elites.

At the same time, given the significant influence and authority that the clergy had within Iranian society, their alliance was indispensable for the constitutionalists to succeed. Therefore, it can be said that there was a pragmatic aspect to the measures taken by the new intellectuals when facing the clergy and *Sharia* law, despite them being often described as radical agents of change.

An excellent example of such an attitude can be seen in Mirza Malcom Khan's (1833-1908) views on reform and progress.¹ Being one of the most influential figures of the constitutional revolution, he stressed the concept of law and emphasized the immediate need for establishing a modern legal and parliamentary system to bring an end to the arbitrary political ruling and chaotic condition in Iran under the

Qajar dynasty, in his magazine *Qanun* (law), published in London.

It can be said that the main point of distinction between the intellectuals and the clergy who backed the reforms was that the former mainly sought to implement the European models and did not really *engage* with religion when rejecting or accepting it. In contrast, the latter tolerated reforms as long as they were *compatible* with their interpretation of *Sharia* law.

The positivistic rejection of religion caused some contradiction. For example, the centuries-long body of Iranian literature, which is greatly indebted to Persian Mysticism (*erfan*), was perceived by many as a source of national pride. At the same time, *erfan* and its collective practice, Sufism, were under attack from both a league of Islamic reformists² and the new intellectuals for their irrationality and perceived cause of the decline of the nation. For example, Zeyn al-Abedin Maraghei (1840-1910), a secular writer noted for his book *Siahat Name-ye Ebrahim Beyg* (Ibrahim Beyg's travelogue),³ described Sufi love literature as illusional, and criticized Persian poets for not "speaking a word" about the love of country, or anything that could be useful to the common people.⁴ It seemed that the idea was developing that such beliefs could not fit into a modern nation-state with a rational, secularizing tendency.

In parallel to the fundamental changes that were taking place in the Iranian political realm, Iranian literature also gradually became distanced from its traditional foundations. The idea that literature should be reformed to facilitate the transition of the country to modernity became widespread in the wake of the constitutional revolution.

In what can be called the first manifesto of modern Persian prose, Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997) used the preface of his short story collection *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* (Once Upon a Time) to call writers, firstly, to use a more straightforward language meant for the general public, not merely the elite, and, secondly, to be the mirror of society and reflect the realities of the social and political changes of the Iranian society (Jamalzadeh, 1921).

Iranian cultural identity is one of the main concerns of Jamalzadeh in this collection. For Jamalzadeh, religion was an overall negative element in constructing the modern Iranian identity. Also, an open mockery of religious fanaticism and anti-Islam sentiments were a part of his narrative. For instance, in *Sahra-ye Mahshar* (Armageddon) published in 1947, Jamalzadeh sneers at the religious authority of his time (Shayesteh, 2011).

Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951) is one the most celebrated Iranian writers and the most renowned outside Iran. He is known for his biting satire and critical realist short stories, as well as his contributions to modern Iranian literature through the use of modern, especially surrealist, techniques, while still accommodating classical and Persian elements. Similar to Jamalzadeh, he portrayed the backwardness of superstitious religious practices while rejecting foreign influences.

Hedayat's dislike of religion is most evident in some of his longer stories such as *Tup-e Morvari* (The Pearl Cannon, 1947), *Afsane-ye Afarinesh* (The Myth of Creation, 1933),

and *Al-bed'hat al-Islamiya Ellal-Belad al-Afranjia* (An Islamic Mission in the European Lands, undated), in which he overtly ridicules Islamic principles and the religious authority. The latter story describes a gathering in Samarra in Arabia in which Islamic nations discuss sending several ambassadors to preach Islam in the world. As Talattof explains in *The Politics of Writing in Iran*, Hedayat deliberately derives Arabized words out of Persian words in the story, which produces "a comical sound to a Persian ear" (Talattof, 2000, p. 61).

While Hedayat's resentment toward Islam persisted, his sense of romantic nationalism faded away as his knowledge and understanding of the historical relationships found more depth. As a result, Hedayat gained more maturity as a writer. His masterpiece, *Buf-e Kur* (The Blind Owl), was first published in 1936 in Mumbai, India, where he resided at the time, in limited stenciled versions. It could not be published in Iran until 1941 due to the politically suffocating environment under Reza Shah's rule (Hillmann, 1989).

Buf-e Kur, which is still considered by many the most fabulous Persian novella, is devoid of any sense of national glory and is instead filled with despair and trauma as if the ideal world, the great perceived glory and utopian conception of things, had been wrecked for Hedayat, and he pictured this wretchedness through his narration. Written in a surrealist style, *Buf-e Kur* deals with the questions of self-perception, existential crisis, and historical consciousness, from an early 20th century Iranian approach. The story consists of two distinct opposing sections, the first one a dream-like setting picturing the ideal transcendental (woman, national identity, uninterrupted glorious history, etc.), and the second one depicting something closer to reality ("the bitch," ruins, and death of glory). This representation of a dichotomic state has been hugely influential in contemporary Iranian literature.

In the case of poetry, it was Nima Yushij (pen name of Ali Esfandiari, 1897-1960) who revolutionized a one-thousand-year-old tradition of Persian poetry, both in form and content, writing free verse poems and adapting a new vision inspired by modern western trends. *Afsaneh* (Myth), published in 1922, is often cited as a turning point for Iranian poetry because of its modern formal and thematic innovations such as "irregular line length, rhyming, and lexical freedom, and imagery that verges on the surreal. For the first time in Persian literature, nature is dramatized in a romantic lyric as an individualistic and subjective entity" (Azad, 2020, p. 213). According to poet and literary scholar Majid Naficy, this poem, which is a dialogic love story between the poet and *Afsaneh* (also a female name in Persian), elevates "romantic love" in opposition to "mystical love," a dominant theme of the classical poetry, and gives the poem "worldly" and "concrete" dimensions (Naficy, 1997). Such tendency is best evident in a part of the poem where Nima enters into a conversation with Hafez, a prominent Iranian poet of the 14th century, whose love poems gave a mystical coloring to words such as "wine" and "globe":

O, Hafez! What lie and deceit is this,
Spoken by the tongue of the wine, the goblet, and the
cup-bearer?

Though you drone on to eternity, I will not believe
That you fall for that which *remains*:
I am in love with that which *moves on*.
I am amazed! Who are you and I?
And on what seasoned wine are we drunk?
We have broken so many bonds,
Yet we escaped not the snare of an *illusion* (Yushij,
2004, p. 178)

All in all, Iranian literary historiography credits Nima Yushij and Sadeq Hedayat as the twin forces who led the modernization of Iranian poetry and prose by setting new paradigms for the generations to come (Yarshater, 1974, p. 45).

SECOND GENERATION: EMBRACING RELIGIOUS TRADITION AS AN EMANCIPATORY NATIVE ASSET

Regarding religion, interesting patterns can be seen during the 1940-1979 period. The goal of this part is to find a link between the seemingly secular ambiance in the Iranian intellectual field and the outcome of the popular social movement, which eventually led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic after the revolution of 1979. One thing is sure: The path to revolution and its aftermath have enormously affected the relationship that intellectuals built with religion, as the shift took place in the social meaning and function of the religion itself.

Turning Toward Working-class Literature: The Era of Committed Intellectuals

Based on Abrahamian, throughout the 1940s and early 1950s, members and sympathizers of the communist Tudeh party⁵ defined the "who's who of modern Iran," which also included modernist writers such as Nima and Hedayat, Bozorg Alavi (1904-1997),⁶ Sadeq Chubak (1916-1998), Shamlu, and many other scholars and intellectuals of the time. Nationalistic and socialistic ideas and sentiments were both in cooperation and rivalry during this time.⁷

An impressive representation of the period is evident in a historic event held in Tehran in July 1946: The First Congress of Iranian Writers, organized by the Iran-Soviet cultural association. A diverse range of literary figures participated in this gathering, from the older literati of the constitutional era to the next generation of modernist writers such as Nima and Hedayat, and also proponents of socialist literature such as Ehsan Tabari (1917-1989) and Fatemeh Sayyah (1902-1948). Soviet imprints were visible in the majority of the eighty or so talks and poetry readings.

Looking at this composition, we can notice multiple tendencies regarding religion. For example, a literary traditionalist figure such as Ali Asqar Hekmat, while expressing his advocacy of "democracy," "literary creativity," and keeping up with the signs of progress of the 20th century, called poetry a godly inspiration. He was then promptly criticized by Ehsan Tabari, a young Marxist literary critic and editor in chief of the organizational magazine of the Tudeh party, *Donya* (World):

I see a contradiction in the definition of poetry conveyed by the previous respected speaker [Hekmat]. At the beginning of his talk, he described poetry as the mysterious connection of the poet with the unseen world and associated the poet's utterances to the eternal world ... These definitions, to me, are nothing but a superficial lure and represent no truth and no reality. Based on these idealistic definitions, poetry is not related to the society, but deals with the supernatural world.... Still, throughout his speech, he tried to also relate the poetic developments to the social and political changes...the paradox is precisely here. If poetry is an outcome of the poet's feelings and senses and these senses are from his life experience in society, then we cannot relate poetry to the other world.⁸

Therefore, figures like Tabari, while respecting its tradition, thought that Iranian classical literature was outdated and should be put aside in the new world.

The coup of 1953, through which the government of the popular prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq was overthrown, is an important turning point.⁹ This incident not only caused a significant disappointment in democratic reforms within the society, but also increased anti-imperialist sentiments among the intellectuals. At this time, the literature field was filled with the feeling of defeat, and literary expressions become more inward and private.

In many of these poetic or literary expressions one could see an *implicit* influence of the religious tradition. For example, in Ahmad Shamlu's post-coup poetry, undermining God sometimes leads to worshipping the man, and mourning execution of political dissidents with a *sacred* sense of martyrdom which has a strong religious connotation in the tradition of *Shi'a* Islam:¹⁰

You had fought all the fights shoulder to shoulder with life
And the curse of the gods could not touch you
And now, weary and cold, you bring me to my knees
Are you the manifestation of the dark fate of the man of this age?

The man I loved, the man I love. (Shamlu, p. 214)

And somewhere else:

Out of each drop of blood
blossoms a flower
and out of each pain
a smile
because every martyr is a tree

In prose, while religion, especially as it was practiced by traditionalists and the clergy, was undermined, protests against what many secular intellectuals called "superficial westernization" of the Pahlavi period significantly increased as well.

Many novels and short stories started to depict rural areas with traditional settings losing their identities as modern tools took over the traditional way of life. In many such stories, poverty forced the rural people to leave their former life and go to the dim, crowded and cruel cities where people, especially rich people, think about nothing but money. *Nefrin-e Zamin* (Curse of the Land, 1968) by Jalal

Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969) and *Asrar-e Ganj-e Darreh-ye Jenni* (Secret of the Treasure of the Hunted Alley, 1974) by Ebrahim Golestan (b. 1922) follow such themes. In Al-e Ahmad's *Nefrin*, Pahlavi's industrialization policies such as land redistribution and automation of agriculture are criticized from the viewpoint of the schoolteacher of a village. Leftist prose writers such as Borzorg Alavi and Mahmud E'temadzadeh (1915-2006) focused on movements and revolts that the state's modernization policies and social alienation caused.

Still, a group of modernist writers appropriated a more sophisticated approach toward tradition and religion and in such descriptions, we can sense the complex influence of religion and tradition within the Iranian society. For example, Bahram Sadeghi (1937-1985) chose to look at the contradictions of Iranian society with a critical yet ironic and humorous tone. In one of his short stories: *Sarasar Hadeseh* (Action-Packed, 1959), Sadeghi organizes the scene in a way that he could gather together a collection of "types" of the people who were living in Iran during the 1960s. Neighbors are invited to a party in a house where tradition still rules. The mother wears a veil at home, yet serves alcohol to the guests, the most religious man drinks alcohol, and the mystic is also a socialist. The third combination is perhaps also the most ironic, as socialism is supposed to imply a revolutionary and secular manner, while we expect a mystic to be religious and socially passive. In one part of the story, we read:

Mr. Mohajer was confused. Why were his religious sentiments escalating as he was getting more drunk? Tears came to his eyes: "if they [the west], occupy us, they will destroy the tombs of our holy Imams...then...then...aren't you concerned? Aren't you Muslims? Everyone, though not knowing what they really were, shook their heads. It was only Dervish [the mystic] who whispered: We are god-worshipping materialists! (Sadeghi, 1970, p. 128).

The Emergence of Nativist Tendencies within the Intellectual and Literature Fields

In a book on the intellectual history of Iran, Mehrzad Boroujerdi conceptualizes the Iranian revolution as "The Tormented Triumph of Nativism," arguing that Iranian intellectuals have tended to look for authentically Iranian solutions, especially in the 1970s. He calls this tendency "nativism," asserting that under the Pahlavi reign, this tendency increasingly led to growing anti-western sentiment, constructing the West as in binary opposition to the Iranian identity, which led to the triumph of Islamists in the end (Boroujerdi, 1996).

As a result, some scholars believe that the first period of the revolution, which was marked by radical Islam being represented not only by figures such as Ayatollah Khomeini but also by Marxist intellectuals and figures such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shari'ati (1933-1977), who combined Marxism (as a classless society) with eschatological Islam in its *Shi'a* version.

The example of Al-e Ahmad, a fiction and polemic writer, clearly shows the strong existing ties between the realms

of political activism and fiction writing and religion in Iran under the national and international influences of the time. Looking at his trajectory makes him an interesting case study of the atmosphere of pre-revolution in Iran. Influenced by different ideological forces of the time, he left a religious seminary to which he was sent by his clerical family, abandoned religion, joined the Tudeh party, rose quickly in the ranks, and finally separated from the Tudeh party together with a faction who were opposed to the Soviet-centered policies of the Tudeh party. He was one of the founding members of the nationalist group Third Force. Al-e Ahmad ultimately became an independent political activist. He studied literature at the university of Tehran and wrote several fiction books, most notably *Modir-e Madreseh* (School Principal, 1958) and *Sangi Bar Guri* (A Stone Upon a Grave, 1963). Al-e Ahmad's life-changing realization was that only Islam can have the emancipatory potential to mobilize the masses, because of its genuine and authentic locality. Ale-Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxication, 1962) suggests that there are no choices other than cultural authenticity or losing one's roots and becoming subservient to the West.

Gradually, the native element found its place among the literary symbols. Karimi-Hakkak describes how several influential Iranian poets and writers who belonged to the secular intelligentsia saw a way out of the Shah's dictatorship by calling for a survivor, similar to religious and mystical figures in the Iranian tradition, citing examples from their works (Karimi-Hakkak, 1991).

The question indeed remains how a group of secular writers became inclined toward religion, or at least attracted by it, as a force capable of mobilizing the masses. How could secular leftist writers such as Shamlu, who rejected religion, internalize a religious-like idealism, and "sacralized" fight and martyrdom in their elegies for the deaths of leftist guerilla fighters?

It cannot be merely to embrace religion, after denying for it. Alternatively, it may refer to the fact that the religion of Shari'ati or Al-e Ahmad was not the same religion that was rejected under the name of backward traditions. On the contrary, the new religion, as reflected in Shari'ati's discourse, was the religion minus clergy, a modern force in serious conflict with both the rank of clergy who were pre-occupied with the surface of religion—not its essence—and the Pahlavi period with its imperialistic traits

These qualities made a modern ideology out of religion, which, due to its popularity among a broad spectrum of the Iranian people, including students and the middle class, largely contributed to the 1979 revolution.

THIRD GENERATION AND FORMATION OF THE NEW SECULAR: EFFORTS TO DECONSTRUCT RELIGIOUS TRADITION

The Revolution of 1979 is marked with the triumph of an ideological revolutionary Islamic understanding which makes the Iranian brand of Shi'ism, a perceived quietist thought, a revolutionary political state, under the syncretistic influence of western Marxism and the anti-enlightenment movement on the one hand, and Islamic fundamentalism on the other.¹¹

The intellectual field of the 1980s was mostly under the influence of anti-western and anti-imperialism discourses, but the situation improved by the gradual emergence of a new generation of intellectuals known as *Rowshanfekran-e Dini* (religious intellectuals), who questioned the legitimacy of revolutionary and radical Islam in favor of pluralistic readings from religion. This intellectual movement provided a ground for the emergence of the reformist government in 1990s (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2014). Institutionally speaking, the reformist government also provided an atmosphere through which independent and secular magazines could become active. The 1990s is considered to be an exceptional decade regarding the dynamics of magazines (Semati, 2007, p. 3). Iranian literature of the late 1980s and 1990s was the scene for the emergence of the post-revolution generation of independent writers who defined works of literature differently from those of the pre-revolution era.

This part focuses on different aspects of the new tendency to criticize the presence of traditional cultural patterns within contemporary cultural works. I am going to discuss two cases, one in prose and the other in poetry. Using these examples, I will argue that after the revolution, some of the writers of the second generation initiated to express a need for a new perspective and acted as intermediary actors between the second and the emerging third generation. In the first case, which goes back to the 1982, a stablished writer criticized another stablished writer's work for following a religio-traditional structure in a modern setting (novel).

Published in *Naqd-e Agah* (Mindful Criticism), a magazine dedicated to cultural and literary criticism and political philosophy, Hushang Golshiri wrote a review about Mahmud Dowlatabadi's novel: *Kelidar*. *Kelidar* which is known for drawing on the Iranian folklore themes, is narrated through an omniscient point of view, and follows the traditional Iranian storytelling style. In the essay, Golshiri compares Dowlatabadi's Novel with the Iranian tradition of *naqqali* (dramatic oral storytelling and performance). He argues that the novel is full of ethical judgements about life, love, woman, etc., conveying a sense of an overwhelming presence of the writer, similar to the *naqqal* who used to perform in cafes to give ethical advice and entertain the audience. He also criticizes *Kelidar* for containing black and white characters, having a theological deterministic approach. According to Golshiri, this style does not provide an Iranian understanding from the modern genre of novel, because its characteristics are in contradiction to the novel which is all about confrontation, struggle and transformation of events and characters (Golshiri, 1982, p. 38).

Similar to Golshiri, Reza Baraheni (b.1935), a poet and literary critic of the second generation, reconsidered his views about literature, most notably in the essay: "Why I am no longer a Nimaic poet," where he rejects his contemporaries' understandings from poetry, including his own pre-revolutionary ideals. For example, Baraheni argues that Shamlu had developed his poetry on the basis on religio-historical narratives which he imposed onto his works, and so gave less attention to the literariness of the works. He argues that Nimaic poetry applied a Cartesian worldview by treating the

form entirely distinct from content, and suggests that modern poetry should preserve links to its predecessors but always deviate from the norms and languages of both the past and present (Baraheni, 1996).

In line with such understanding, the second example is chosen from an essay by a poet from the third generation, Mehrdad Fallah (b.1960) who compares the poems of his generation with that of the previous generation. Fallah argues that the new generation of Iranian poets have adopted a different approach to poetry in that they no longer perceive poetry as a “sacred” entity inspired by god or any kind of truth or duty as it was previously understood. Instead, they believe that poetry is a historical phenomenon, shaped by the conditions of today and now (Fallah, 1998). In explaining the new perspective, Fallah provides several examples from the poetry of pre and post 1979’s revolution to make his points clearer. He cites several short pieces from prolific contemporary writers, including:

“My wounds are all wounds from love” from Forough Farrokhzad, or “A mountain starts with its first stones, and man starts with his first pain” from Ahmad Shamlu (Fallah, 1998, p. 37). As we can see, both of these pieces are timeless and placeless, and try to define abstract concepts such as love or life or the human-being. Then Fallah provides a piece from a poem by Shams Langrudi (b.1950), a member of the new generation:

From the keyhole
I am looking into the forgotten room
the dusty vase
a crumpled sheet over the passing years
and the autumn sun that has fallen sleep on the fireplace
a cut of light on tip of the knife
and a clock that has lost the time (Fallah, 1998, p. 37)

The above-mentioned piece although imaginative and poetic, is at the same time detailed and about tangible objects. Fallah concludes by saying that the new generation is distancing from mystical expressions, even it in “earthly” form.

Finally, equipped with new analytical tools of cultural and literary criticism, this generation of writers focused on the superficiality of the previous generations’ secularity by pointing to traditional religious notions and forms that were embodied in their works despite their claims to be secular. For example, some of these discussions focused on re-reading the classical literature, sacred texts and myths. For instance, Saleh Hoseini, an Iranian literary critic, translator and university professor, writes about the relationship between sacred texts, myths and literature in the west in a cultural magazine. Citing Northrop Frye, a Canadian literary theorist, Hoseini explains that there is a link between social and literary myths and sacred texts. With the advent of modernity and progress in the field of literary criticism, the roots of such relationship were studied. Hoseini then suggests that the similar studies need to be done on Iranian classical literature and sacred texts. They need to be re-read, so that we can become conscious about their cultural influence and overcome those parts that divert from reason and rationality. Still the desirable outcome is not putting them

aside, because they are a great source of beauty (Hoseini, 2002, pp. 62-67).

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to revisit the category of the Iranian ‘secular’ writer by looking into the trajectory of the Iranian literature field and its shifting relation to religious tradition during the 20th century. The paper argues that the 1979 revolution and its aftermath led the secular writers to re-read the religious tradition differently from the first and second generations of writers. The first generation of Iranian secular writers mostly undermined the religious tradition as outdated rituals, and the second generation made a return to it as an authentic part of the Iranian identity under the local and global socio-political influences. The third generation went beyond such rejection/ embrace narratives, came to see the religious tradition as a cultural legacy and engaged in re-reading and deconstructing that legacy in new secular ways. Therefore, as the examples from several discussions about the Iranian literary tradition demonstrated, one can argue that the approach of the third generation *redefined* the literary secularism in Iran. The significance of third generation’s attitude lies in the fact that they saw secularism as a process that required conscious and careful efforts to reconsider the tradition in a serious manner, unlike the first generation for whom secularism was more of an end product of the enchanted western world.

END NOTES

- 1 For example, in an overstatement, one scholar writes that modern Iranian writers have long been fighting against two social “demons”, one being the demon of religion (see Ghanoonparvar, 1985).
- 2 This includes Jamal al-Din al-Afqani, who called for the revival of Islamic rationality and philosophy. See (Boroujerdi, 1996).
- 3 Zeyn al-Abidin Maraghei (1840-1910) was born in Maragheh but died in Istanbul. He was a novelist and social reformer. (Sepanlu, 2018).
- 4 In one episode, Ibrahim admonishes, “The ‘Story of the Candle and the Moth’ is worn out; speak about founding Spermacti Candle Factory.” See (Ridgeon, 2006, p. 24)
- 5 Hezb-e Tudeh-ye Iran (Party of the Masses of Iran), Iran’s first communist party, was founded in 1921 during the first Pahlavi rule.
- 6 Bozorg Alavi, an influential Iranian writer, novelist, and political intellectual, was not only a Tudeh sympathizer, but one of its founding members in the 1940s. See (Mirabedini, 2009).
- 7 The rivalry concerned the national vs. transnational aspects of freedom and justice. Such theme can be seen in the literature field, too. While for the poet Shamlu, the concept of “human” mattered the most, Akhavan is famous for his nationalistic poetry and considerable use of Persian myths.
- 8 First Congress of Iranian Writers, proceedings, Negin Publication, July 1946, (in Persian), (pp. 41-43). Translation by the author.

- 9 Mosaddeq led the nationalist party and started fundamental reforms and pushed for the nationalization of the Iranian economy. His government was overthrown by Shah agents with the help of CIA and MI6.
- 10 *Shi'a* Muslims mourn the martyrdom of the third *Shi'a* Imam, Hossein, annually every month of Muharram. It informs the central beliefs and practices in *Shi'a* Islamic ritual.
- 11 This is widely agreed on among researchers of the Iranian revolution.

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