# A brief history of Iran's modern literature

Iranians love poetry and it is said that all Iranians try their hand at writing poetry at least once in their lives.

In Iran, it is not unusual to hear verses from poets living 600 to 900 years ago. They pop up in daily interactions, on TV and radio, and even during political speeches. Unfortunately, this widespread enthusiasm for poetry doesn't result in a strong reading culture. The public's reception of modern works of literature depends on different political, social, and economic factors, with numerous ups and downs in recent history.

In spite of a rich trove of classical works (mainly poems), modern Iranian literature is less than a hundred years old. If we consider the works of Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951) in fiction and Nima Yushij (1895-1960) in poetry as the beginning of Iran's modern literature, then we can discern two influential factors in its development. First, there is a certain level of familiarity and interaction with the latest intellectual trends and literary achievements of the West. Second, a political openness at home, which brings about a suitable atmosphere for exchange of ideas and publication of new voices.

The Constitutional Revolution of Iran (1905-1907), which resulted in the creation of parliament and the publication of numerous newspapers and journals, made suitable ground for the development of Iran's first generation of modern writers. Around the same time, the return of Iran's first graduates of European universities (made possible through government funding) brought in a new wave of modernisation, along with translations of Western literature and philosophy.

Hedayat and Yushij both studied in French-speaking St. Louis school in Tehran, and were familiar with contemporary Western literature. Hedayat was the first to translate the works of Kafka and Chekhov, and wrote an extensive introduction for the Persian edition of Kafka's stories.

[The Blind Owl](http://www.amazon.com/The-Blind-Owl-Sadegh-Hedayat/dp/0802144284) (1937), Hedayat’s surrealist-melancholic masterpiece, was the first modern novel in Persian language – a response to an oppressed society and the ideals of the Constitutional Revolution. The novel’s narrator, as a symbol of the overwhelmed and scorned Iranian intellectual, has been aware for some time of the 'dreadful abyss' between him and the rest of society, and now only writes for his shadow on the wall, to better know his self.

From 1941 to 1953, owing to occupation by allied forces during the Second World War and the weakening of the Iranian central government, there was a boom in political activism and independent publications. Between  1941 to 1947, around 500 newspapers and journals began publication. The First Congress of Iranian Writers also convened during the same period, in the summer of 1946. Sadegh Chubak, Bozorg Alavi, Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, and Ebrahim Golestan are the most notable writers who started their careers during this period.

What distinguished writers of this era was their deep social and political commitment. In addition, familiarity with modern literary techniques and innovations comes through in their reading of works by authors like Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck. Al-e-Ahmad and Chubak went head to head in their works about patriarchal authority and religious superstitions, and tried to depict the lives of workers and the lower strata of society. Bozorg Alavi, high among the ranks of Iran's communist Tudeh Party, published the first prison writings and portrayed personal and emotional aspects of political prisoners’ experience in his stories. Antagonism between the modernising zeal of young students returning from abroad and underdevelopment, superstition and political oppression at home, is another recurring theme in the works of Alavi and other writers of this period.

In the 1960s, a new generation of writers and poets started their careers who not only had better access to Western literature and its translations, but could also build upon the experiences of the previous generation. Gradual easing of the oppressive political atmosphere after the [CIA-funded coup](http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB435/#_ftn1) in 1953 enabled these new voices to flourish. The decade before the 1979 revolution can be called the golden age of Iranian literature in this sense. Writers’ social and political influence grew rapidly throughout this period, and their works achieved massive circulation – sometimes more than ten thousand copies of their first editions alone. Novels such as [Savushun](http://www.amazon.com/Savushun-Novel-Modern-Persian-Classics/dp/0934211310) (Simin Daneshvar), [Prince](http://www.amazon.com/The-Prince-Hushang-Golshiri/dp/0099468395) (Houshang Golshiri), Neighbours (Ahmad Mahmoud), and Missing Soluch (Mahmoud Dowlatabadi), are among the most notable works published in this decade.

Golshiri came into contact with the latest theoretical and critical developments of literature, such as the Nouveau Roman movement, and read works by authors such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, and Jorge Luis Borges in Jong-e Isfahan – a literary periodical established in Isfahan by its literary circle of the time.

In his masterpiece, Prince (1969), through the depiction of the decaying days of an aristocrat family, Golshiri manages to improve on the achievements of Hedayat in the structural and linguistic aspects of the novel. Daneshvar, Iran's first female novelist, in her realist masterpiece Savushun (1969), portrays chaos and mayhem in the wake of military occupation of Fars province by allied forces in the first half of 1943. In the novel, she describes the heroic battle of its female protagonist to protect her household against these upheavals. Daneshvar’s depiction of the lively and numerous characters, and her dynamic portrayal of an eventful historical period, are among the novel's prominent achievements.

Neighbours (1974) is set in the city of Ahvaz in southern Iran against the background of events leading to nationalisation of oil industry. It's a coming-of-age story of Khalid from his first sexual experiences to his political awakening. Mahmud's depiction of this transition is main accomplishment of this realist masterpiece.

In the autumn of 1977, about one year before the revolution, Goethe reading nights were organised by the Iranian Writers' Association at the German embassy's cultural section for ten consecutive nights. The reading nights, which featured 60 writers arguing mostly against censorship and political oppression, drew more than ten thousand people.

During the 1980s, with the eight-year Iran–Iraq war, the curbing of short-lived freedoms of the years immediately after the revolution, and the blacklisting of most of the famous writers, Iranian literature lost much of its vitality and strength. War and economic problems distracted people from literature to some extent, and the emigration and exile of many prominent writers left a gaping void behind.

This depressed atmosphere somehow lingered on up to 1997. Khatami’s presidency, which brought in an energetic reform movement, created another wave of newspaper and magazine publications, creating a fertile ground for the emergence of new literary voices.

A new generation of young writers took advantage of this opportunity. Some of them, like Hossein Sanapour and Zoya Pirzad, managed to gain critical acclaim and a large audience which had mostly ignored the literature of the preceding years. Newspapers’ literary pages, in addition to numerous literary prizes funded by non-governmental organisations, helped to re-energise the literary scene. Around half of the literary prizes were awarded to women who started to publish during this period. Half of them were first-time writers. This was quite unprecedented.

This growing trend, which was interrupted during Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005-2013) by increased censorship and banning of many independent publications and newspapers, has somehow been revived during the past year. Easing of censorship and regulations, along with a better condition for independent press, have brought back some of Iranian literature's lost vitality.

**Longing for a global audience**

Iranian writers have longed for a larger, global audience beyond the limitations of the language, ever since Sadegh Hedayat wrote two of his short stories in French. Some big waves of migration out of Iran during the last thirty years, and closer contact with cultural circles abroad, have resulted in Iranian modern literature – and its translation into European languages – gaining more attention. However, geopolitical motives also have a role to play. This tendency is sometimes evident in the book titles themselves, such as [Literature from the 'Axis of Evil'](http://www.amazon.com/Literature-Axis-Evil-Writing-Nations/dp/1595582053) – a translation of poems and stories by Iranian, Iraqi, and North Korean writers, published in 2007.