The Reflection of Bushehr’s Culture in Folk Literature

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Abstract

This essay studies the ways in which some authentic cultural elements of the city of Bushehr, which in fact is a notable example of the greater cultural civilization of Iran, are represented in folk literature. This cultural tradition founded as it is on ancient and firm pillars truly manifests all human values. Folk literature reflects the different aspects of human beings’ wishes and ambitions among which this essay studies: loyalty, courage, love of knowledge, and hospitality.

Keywords: Folklore and popular literature, Hospitality, Courage, Loyalty, Love of knowledge.
Introduction:
Folklorists have carried out a lot of research about folk literature. In fact, such studies are one of the most commonly practiced ones as shown by the large amount of literature in this area. Despite this, the history of these studies does not exceed a century in Iran. Sadeq Hedayat, Naser al-Din Shah Hosseini, Moniru Ravanipour, and Sobhi Saleh are among the pioneers of folklore studies. However, “attention and research in folklore songs (national songs) has begun only a century ago in Iran. National songs have emerged from the depth of the lives of the masses” (Panahi Semnani 1985:4).

Prior to my book on folk literature, The Folklore of Bushehr (2002), only one book by Abdolhossein Reyshahri Bushehri under the title of Rockland [Sangestan] was published. However, Rockland surveys the aspects of popular culture only in passing and does not analyze them in details. The present essay is an excerpt of my own book which was initially my PhD dissertation [Adabiat-e Amiyaneh Bushehr]. My study mostly concentrated on field research and oral stories rather than books and other written forms of documents.

Literary scholars consider that all national literatures are born from popular or folk literature. “New artistic forms are created by an evolution of minor forms. For example, Dostoyevsky’s novels were written by changing the genre of crime novels, or William Blake’s poems are in fact the perfected forms of gypsy songs” (Shamisa 1997:146).

Like other regions of the highly cultured and civilized Iran, folk literature plays a pivotal role in the city of Bushehr. Nevertheless, some of the cultural codes and traditions belong specifically to Bushehr and its folklores. “Folk literature and culture is a collection of beliefs, ideas, customs and rituals, tales, songs, and simple poems of a nation” (Razmjou 1993:138).

Since the official and mainstream literature of a nation originates in folk literature, the best way to study the culture of a nation is through analyzing its folk literature. Folk literature does not have a special writer and describes the lives of all people. In its simple language it recounts the lives of all classes of people. Such literature is the narrative of collective memory of a nation, presented in its purest form, which represents every nook and cranny of the less known culture of Iran and its people.

In the folklore of Bushehr, some of the manifestations of the authentic traditions and customs of its people are prominently reflected so much so that such vigor and aesthetic beauty may not be found elsewhere. In the following some of the cultural prerogatives of Bushehr, as reflected in folk literature, are presented:
Generosity and hospitality:
One of the appreciable traits of Iranian culture is “hospitality”. People living in Bushehr are the most famous one for practicing hospitality. This trait is reflected in various folk tales and songs some of which are presented here as examples – a lot of these exist.

\[
\text{The pot boiling on fire / the rice stew stirring like my heart} \\
\text{The rice mixing with the milk / and my heart mixing with desire for my kith and kin}^{1}
\]
(Rezaei, 2002:73).

The above poem, in addition to depicting the poverty-stricken way of living in the past, shows that people are preparing food and waiting for other relatives and friends to come and join them as their guests. The heart’s desire to host others is in an ironic contrast with today’s common lack of generosity and hospitality.

\[
\text{His dear son coming back from a voyage / a grand feast his father gives to all in his honor} \\
\text{(ibid: 22)}
\]

The father who is very happy generously gives a feast when his son returns from a sea voyage. In the Persian language shaylun connotes a great feast which hundreds of people attend.

\[
\text{The moon is in the sky, and the clouds tattered / the meat and the wine scattered} \\
\text{Oh you the youth come together and drink / time will never the youth bring} \quad \text{(ibid: 66).}
\]

This poem calls to mind the theme of carpe diem in classic literature. It depicts giving a feast in Bushehr in the moon light – the city did not have electricity in the past. A person invites his friends to the party where he generously hosts them; such a generosity was rarely found in a poverty-stricken context of the time.

Love of knowledge:
One of the oldest schools of Iran, called “Sa’adat [literally: Bliss] was established in Bushehr. Moreover, currently the number of university and university students is the highest of all in Bushehr in comparison to other cities of Iran. It is clear that the people living in Bushehr are highly cultured and love acquiring knowledge. They have inherited love of knowledge from their ancestors. From the folk and classic literature it can concluded that our ancestors tried to gain knowledge as best as they could. For example,

\[
\text{It is great to marry a scholar / great it is if his pockets are full and his pencil golden} \quad \text{(ibid: 34).}
\]

\[^{1}\text{Persian poetry in general and folk songs in particular are highly prosodic and rhythmic. Here, only the literal translations are given.}\]
The above song which is an example of women’s songs shows the high love of knowledge and literacy. This is especially important given the context of illiteracy of the time. The song depicts a young girl whose only desire is to marry a scholar with a golden pencil.

I wish a golden pencil in your hands, the father-in-law / since you married your son to my daughter, long live you indeed (ibid: 21).

The poem shows a prayer for the father-in-law who has prepared a wedding part for the marriage of two people, and a long life is wished for him.

How great it is to have a literate wife / to sit together till the rise of sun (ibid: 52).

As the poem shows it is great to have a knowledgeable wife with whom one could converse till morn. The above song depicts the wish of young man to marry a literate wife so that they can learn from one another.

Loyalty:

Another cultural feature of the city of Bushehr which has been emphasized is loyalty and fidelity. Folk literature has reflected both the existence of this trait and complained about its lack by showing remorse and regret. Some examples include,

You are gone, and left me alone / in this city of Bushehr I have no one to look at
In the whole city no one as beautiful as you can be found / oh your beauty where be found (ibid: 81)

The lover reproves himself for disloyalty and infidelity.

The other day I left the port / leaving my love behind, how terrible it is
I reached a plain / sat down, cried and complained (ibid: 70)

The lover chides himself for not remaining loyal to his beloved.

You promised me the spring / spring has come now
Layman’s spring is the new year / my spring is your eyes (ibid: 73).

The lover complains that his beloved has not kept her promise to come. In the next example, the lover regrets that he has left his beloved and his city behind. He then weeps for his lack of loyalty.

Sometimes “loyalty” is considered a special trait of people of Bushehr, and that which other lack:

I left my father’s house / seeking friendship elsewhere
These strangers are not good / first your friend, and disloyal at the end (ibid: 70).
Courage:
In not so distant a past, the famous story of people of Bushehr driving the British colonizers out of the city began to be shared by everyone. It is still remembered with a sense of honor by the people. It has always been the dream of the courageous people to build a developed city in Bushehr, a land they had inherited from their ancestors. Iranian folk literature permeates with epic stories which have gone through ages. Courage and bravery have always been considered important because of the national and ethnic solidarity and stability they can bring about. Let us bring some examples to show the significance of courage in folk literature:

That young brunette man has ripped his clothes off / taken a gun and joined the group (ibid: 20).
At night a robbed a bank / a thousand and three hundred coins I bought guns (ibid: 92).
I will find a gun, and sit on the hill / watching everyone till I see my love (ibid: 92).

In the above line, the speaker’s aim is to buy a gun and ransack the whole place for the sake of his black-haired beloved.

The people’s love for guns – connoting courage – is so much so that they compare their beloved ones to guns instead of trees:
At sunset I will be at Gonaveh, at noon at Bereng / my beloved is as lovely as a gun
This gun is great at aiming / my love great in brewing tea (ibid: 98).

This girl whose mother is a sly widow / I beckon her to bring my gun, and she beckons me the bed (ibid: 98).

The desire to go fighting is in contrast with the desire to stay home. The man complains that while he asked his wife to bring him guns and clothes for the war, she nags about loneliness and points to the bed.

The young man is tall and broad-shouldered / when he comes back I’ll let him kiss me (ibid: 104).

Courage and bravery are not limited to the man. As the above line shows a girl who allows to be courted by a man because of the latter’s courage. There are many epic lines of folk literature in this regard some of which I will quote here:

This gun I love so much / it hits the aim with in less than so much (ibid: 104).

The gun in the above line brings honor and fame for the fighter.

My gun I have decorated with silver / the gun in arm and my love stride the garden (ibid: 104).

In the above line, the gun functions as symbol against any threat.

The gun on my left shoulder / no fear, I will be the first in line (ibid: 109).
It must be noted that courage is so important in the lives of people of Bushehr that it is reflected in the lullabies sung by mothers to their children. In the following lullaby, a mother sings to his recently awaken song what she expects from him:

Early in the morning he has risen, happy as a lark / tends the horses and shows his powers and craftsmanship / well-done of my son, what a brave and fearless man you will be

Conclusion:
Studying the culture of Bushehr shows that the people of this city have surpassed in some cultural values their countrymen. In fact, these people have often felt a responsibility and a cause for preserving the traditional values and customs of their culture.

Cultural aspects of Bushehr are not limited to what has been mentioned in this essay. Other important traits which are prominent include sacrifice, magnanimity, munificence, punctuality, religiosity, modesty, humility, assiduity, sense of honor, sense of humor, gift giving, and many more.

Each of the above traits can be a topic for further research to shed some light on the authentic and true cultural traditions and values of Iran.
References