Survey on the socio-cultural issues in Tanser letter

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Abstract

Sociology of literature has a broad scope which studies sociological aspects of literature and examines various social issues. This field of study not only considers the author of a work but also investigates the work as the representative of its social and cultural contexts. This research studies the socio-cultural issues of the Tanser letter by documentary method. It is one of the Sassanid period epistles that it was written by Tanser (the consultant of Ardeshir) in response to the critical questions of the governor of Tabristan. It is obvious that a literary work includes the qualities and characteristics of its period and for this reason, any literary setting and oeuvres are influenced by the social conditions which this fact has been clarified in research on the cultural constructs of the Tanser letter period.

Keywords: Aspects of literature, Tanser letter, socio-cultural issue, cultural construct.
Introduction

Literature in its critical mission in relevance to life issues expresses the general opinions and assumptions that affect social life at different ages in tangible way and in order to realize the value of human society in different periods it is necessary to study the different views about the nature of human in that society (J. Grace, 2009, p. 50). Sociology of literature is a social science studies literature as a part of social consciousness and investigates social constructs of literature, social circumstances including the poet and writer setting, their intellectual and cultural world view and social issues mentioned in the literary works (Torabi, 1997, p.4).

Human being considers the world through his senses and thinks through wisdom. Human perception goes beyond the material world. His experience which is shaped based on his power of perception is combined with his human affections and makes the medium for literature and the powerful mind of the writer rebuilds the existential scenes eloquently and masterfully and the reader unifies with him and in other words, he loves and dislike, hopes and disappointed as him and the reader begins another life with different meanings and form combined by the thoughts and affections of the writer ( J.Grace, 2009,p.8). Literature reflects a specific form of life and culture. It is an art of cultural and social conduct which represents the perfection of the man and revolution of the society. This examines the social and political status in Sassanid period.

Problem statement

“Initiative of sociology of literature is to describe the relationship between literature and society”(Jean Yves Tardie, 1999, p.183). “Since there is a close relationship between literature and society, studying literary works offer valuable information on society and social relations. The importance of connection between literature and society and the writer and his society is so that some believe a poet or a writer is sensitive sense of that society that narrates contemporary events. Poetry and literary works in their broad meaning represent the poet or the writer characteristics and his social context”(Mobasheri, 2010, p.11).

The main issue is investigating the social and cultural aspects including costumes, monuments, rituals, believes and individual and social attitudes towards woman, children and etc.

Research goals

The goals of this research are:
1- Investigating on the social ideas mentioned in the Tanser letter including different scopes such as government, family, penalties and education.
2- Investigating social classes including jurisprudents, judges, scholars and common people.
3- Explaining the beliefs, rituals, customs, arts and social ethics in Sassanid period mentioned in this letter.

Research background

Several books and articles have been written on social issues in literature. For instance, it can be referred to “Survey on the Khaqani world” by Masumeh Madankan, “Survey on the socio-
political issues in Politics Book and Gabus book” by Minu Amir Gasemi and “Investigation on the social issues in Molana poems”. Since the Tanser letter is one of the unknown Persian books and no comprehensive research has been done on social ideas and thoughts mentioned in these books, this research seemed necessary. In the books “Sassanid Kings” and “Iran in Sassanid Era”, Christensen has referred to Tanser letter and explained its subject and time of writing but this information is insufficient.

Katayun Mazdapour writes: “The Tanser letter is an outstanding example of Persian book which has considered social issues and principles and basics of governance”(Mazadpour, 2007, p. 75).

Fatollah Mojtabaei believes that Tanser letter is of importance due to the position of its author in Sassanid government and that period social and political status and introduces Tanser not only a Zoroastrian priest but the savor of Zoroastrianism (Mojtabaei, 1973, p. 97).

Research questions

1- Does the culture of the mentioned books close to court culture or common people culture?
2- What are various rituals and customs mentioned in the Tanser letter?

Research method

The research method was documentary and the data were collected through studying the resources and analysis of text and the data collection tool was taking notes.

Tanser letter and its social and cultural aspects

The Ardeshir Papakan period and converting the feudal state to imperial governance and founding Sassanid dynasty and empowering Zoroastrianism have been led to consideration of this era as one of the outstanding periods in history. “Concurrent to empowering Sassanid dynasty which regenerated the former reign, a national religion was established in Iran and the Zoroastrian priests declared themselves as an integrated group with exact and defined religious principles and hierarchy. The king and the courtiers were considered in second rank”(Safari Nia, 2011, p. 105).

“Writing epistles was common in Sassanid era and the aim was informing people on the social issues and consequently inviting them to consider the necessity of obedience and enforcement of these rules. Among epistles, the Tanser latter is of importance. In this letter for depicting the depth of evolutions, at first the social and cultural issues have been criticized and the chaotic status of country has been explained extensively and then the revolutions made by Ardeshir in the society have been mentioned (Minavi, 1932, p. pp.93-94).

Socio- cultural issues mentioned in Tanser letter can be categorized as follows:
- **Concentration of power and governance practices**: In this book the author describes Alexander and feudal states and their chaotic period and then criticizes these rulers and promulgates concentration of power. According to long governance of Sassanid dynasty, it can be concluded that they had plans for preservation of power. The founder of this dynasty had enacted some essential rules for empowering of his governance and protecting the government:
a- Concurrency and bond between religion and government: Tanser has considered this point more obviously that “Religion is protector of kingdom and the king is protector of religion” (Poladi, 2006, p. 36).

b- The absolute authority of the king: Tanser praises Ardeshir centralized governance. He tries to introduce him as the only ruler that could combine earthly order with his ideal order by offering various witnesses. He defends the notion of one God and one ruler. This despotism was followed in killing of the opponents and subjugating of the local rulers (Zarrinkoob, 1995, p. 166).

c- Choosing the crown prince: According to the Tanser letter in order to choose the crown prince, “The king should write three letters and give one of them to a trustful person, one to the head of the priests and the last one to the head of the Secretaries and when the king died they gather together and poll their votes to select one of the princes” (Minavi, 1932, p. 88). They were great men who chose one of the princes as the king that depicts choosing the crown prince of that period (Christensen, 1995, p. 166).

-Social classes in the society
In Aryans opinions, Iran and India and all over the world are continuous and a power rules on general and minor affairs. According to Zoroastrianism, two good and evil forces fight each other in the world” (Enayat, 1999, p. 76). In this universe everybody should be in his place and everybody has a place. The Tanser intellectual foundations were the Zoroastrianism foundations from existentialism perspective. He believed that preserving this structure leads to empowerment of the world and people. This belief was influential in obedience of people; so that it has been referred to three fires belonged to three social classes in the Zoroastrian great priests’ narratives. In the new era, the social divisions were based on the holy books and three or four classes have been mentioned by some changes. In Avesta, these four classes have been mentioned only once: the first class included priests, the second class was soldiers and the third and fourth groups were artisans. “Since social classes divisions were in accordance to political status, four great classes were established in Sassanid government: first class included clergymen, second class included soldiers and guards, third class involved learned men and fourth class included shepherds, artisans, citizens and others” (Christensen, 1935, pp.24-25).

It seems that the old social classes division was considered spiritual affair in that period and this rule was observed without any protest: “The people hierarchy should be preserved” (Minavi, 1932, p.57).

This division was influential even in their costumes, houses and life styles: “For promoting their status, the king ordered to discriminate their grades, costumes, houses, wives, servants and they should know their place…” (ibid, p.65).

-Education
This period deserves to put more emphasis since first, Iran civilization was influenced by this period in first Islamic centuries and second, movements were shaped which caused to apparent decline of post-Islam civilizations and defeat of Iranian against Arabs. Some ancient Iran teachings including equitation and archery were combined by masculinity, strength, abstention beauty, honesty and chastity. Hence the religious leaders were pioneers in education (Bizhan, v.1, 1937, pp.3-4). “Iranians are famous for courage and they are aware of fighting techniques, governance and pleasing” (Minavi, 1932, p. 46).

“In Sassanid period the clergymen were responsible for intermediate and higher education. There is no comprehensive information on public education and we only know that the peasants were
illiterate and the merchants could read and write and they knew calculation. Education was religious. The princes, princesses and courtiers learned equitation as the Achaemenian courtiers and they knew archery and there were fields far from city centers for equitation and the young men rode horses and did archery” (Meshkor, 1968, p.85). In the Tanser letter, the principles of education have been mentioned according to social classes and basically the aim was instructing predefined duties: “Everybody had a head to instruct him and then he had an inspector and a teacher to teach him knowledge. The teachers and judges were appointed to teach principles of chivalry and customs and they learned these principles”(Minavi, 1932, p. 61). Salebi writes: “The children of lower class were deprived of education since they knew that if they learn knowledge they will demand higher posts and when they reach this position they disdain the aristocrats”(Salebi, 1949, p.292).

- The role of militants

According to the Tanser letter the second rank of the society included “soldiers and officers and they were divided into two groups: infantries and cavalries and the others had their hierarchies”(Minavi, 1932, p. 57). The king, courtiers and aristocrats emphasized military force and according to Strabo, the main Iranian educational element consisted of strengthening physical power, learning archery and equation among 5 to 14 years old children and youths and they had wages and privileges. “The aristocrats and their wives wore expensive and silky costumes and lived in luxurious palaces. They knew archery and horse riding and the soldiers and officers were promoted and they sacrificed their lives, properties and relatives and established peace and security and they were respected”(ibid, pp.70-71). However, the rulers and commanders of the border cities paid attention to military force due to sensitivity of their territories. Generally, military force in the borders and also guardians of the king and courtiers consisted of two great infantries and cavalries”(Nejad Akbari, 2009, pp. 263-264).

-Marriage customs

Iranians paid more attention to marriage and encouraged their children to get marry and it was a religious affair. In addition, they were interested in preserving their generations and having children. The Childless person was anonymous in the world and in the hereafter he could not pass Chinvat Bridge. In the Sassanid period, some men could have several wives and some kings had numerous wives and they had also illegal wives. The woman might obey her husband and the Iranian women were superior to other oriental women. They were engaged in childhood and they were encouraged to get marry in their fifteenth. One of the denied issues which there are documents was marriage with close relatives. In Zoroastrianism the term “khevtuk-das” refers to this type of marriage which was prohibited in all ancient religions except old Egyptians religion. In Avesta and other Zoroastrian texts, it has emphasized that khevtuk-das removes sins and the Iranians propagated this type of marriage and the individuals got married with women from their own rank. The principle of marriage in the Sassanid period, as recorded in the religious books of the Zoroastrians, is very complex and confusing, but there were five customary kinds of marriage.

1- A wife who was married with the consent of her parents, and who gave birth to children who were hers in this world and hereafter, was called “padishah-e zan” (queen of the wives).

2- A wife who was the only child of her father and mother was called “ug zan” (unique wife). The first child she gave birth to was given over to her parents so that the child could fill the place
of his or her mother who had gone from the house and had married. Thereafter she too was spoken of as “padishah-e zan”.

3- If a man died in his youth without marrying, the members of his family used to give a dower to a woman from another family, and take her to the house of a man not of their family, and that woman was called “sidhar zan” (adopted wife). Any child that she gave birth to was to be considered in the next world as one half or the young man who had died and the other half of the man still alive.

4- A widow who married for the second time was called “chigar zan” (servant wife). If she had no issue by her first husband she was given the status of “sidhar zan”.

5- A woman who went to a husband without the consent of her father and mother was considered to be of the lowest status, and she was called “khud saray-e zan” (willful wife), and did not inherit from her father or mother. Nevertheless, when her son reached the age of puberty and accepted her as his “ug zan”, her status changed.” (Nejad Akbari, 2009, p. 218).

6- Abdal: it was meant marriage instead of other one that depicts the importance of survival of a family generation. If a person had no wife and child and if he had a wife, they let her to marry with the relatives of the man and if the woman delivered the child was considered from generation of her former husband and in other case, the woman was killed and it was believed that that man generation should be preserved forever (Minavi, 1932, pp.67-68).

- Inheritance law
There were inspectors in all of Iran and they supervised on enforcement of the inheritance laws and succession of the dead. It might be these inspectors were clergymen since they were responsible for division of the properties of the dead and if a person had no property the priests were responsible for his funeral and protecting his children (Ganei, 2010, p. 42). “The king appointed inspectors to protect the properties of the dead and divide his properties according to his will and everybody who had not properties they were responsible for his children” (Minavi, 1932, p. 67). The heirs of a person could not be deprived of father inheritance except in case of having debate or providing the wife and children subsistence; in this case a part of his properties was allocated to such expenditures. Unmarried daughter received a share from his father properties and if the king had two wives, they had shares (Najad Akbari, 2009, p. 221).

“it was necessary the person to write his wills when he was healthy and the testate of an insane and an ill man was not accepted and if a person deprived some of his children from inheritance they could complain and receive their share. If a person died and had no testate his sons and daughters received the same shares and his widow received two shares and the blind and ill widow received twice share relative to healthy widow and the widow was responsible for protecting the man properties and house when the man had not adult children and she might help to relatives of the man” (Mehrin, 1980, p. 100).

- Justice court and penalties
There were judges in any region and in case of lack of judge; the ruler of the region investigated the complaints and claims. There were some army judges. Marceline writes: “Iranians obeyed
the rules and those who were ungrateful and escaped the army were punished heavily, for instance all members of his family were killed when a person committed a crime. It should be pointed that it was the first memorial of human civilization that all members of a tribe were punished for person guilt (Ganei, 2010, p. 24). Sassanid period which was based on religion is important from Iran law history perspective and the great legal text, Matigan-i Hazar Datistan includes various civil law issues such marriage, inheritance, ownership, mandate, devotion, rent and mortgage, power of attorney and some criminal issues. This text which is considered as Iran Sassanid civil law was not an official law but it was religious one(Tafazoli, 2009, p. 286). The Tanser letter includes important information about Ardeshir reformation in criminal law and civil law scopes: “They shall know that three sins are punished one since between the man and God that is heretic, the sin between the person and the king that the person betrays the king and the last one is sin among the brothers that one oppresses the other and since we saw that in the former law the oppressed man had no place and the common people were suffered from oppression we enacted this law and ordered the judge to judge among people and punish the oppressor and cut their nose and ears”(Minavi, 1932, pp. 63-64).

The judges were respected and they were learned and just. According to documents the judges were aware of law and they were appointed from clergymen. The head of judges was called “Shahar Dadvar or Dadvar Dadvaran” and they were also called “Rad”.

Three steps were observed in religious sins: first, repentance, second catharsis and third punishment. Repentance was the sinner inner regret but it did not prevent conventional or wordily punishment and its importance relied only on this belief that it purified the sinner soul and prevented from hereafter world punishment. Catharsis included eliminating evil souls through religious rituals. The sinner might be punished in this world to suffer hereafter world punishment (Meshkor, 1968, p. 69).

Robbery was common at that period and there were specific penalties for thieves. A thief captured while stealing the stolen goods were tied on his neck and he was taken to the judge (Christensen, 1925, p. 104). The Zoroastrian priest were so powerful and influential that they suppressed any anti-Zoroastrianism plans and called the opponents pagan and killed the proponents of other religions particularly Mazdakians. In Avesta they were called heretic and they were condemned to destruction and abolishment of religion and in addition sorcery was a great sin and the witchcrafts were punished heavily (Amuzegar, 2007, p. 71).

-Values and beliefs

Norms determine how the people behave in defined conditions; norms cause to uniformity of social life; since they guides the people to behave to each other and how to expect each other; hence there is a great social pressure on the people to adjust with these norms. The cultural norms of a society represent its values. Values are beliefs that the members of human groups have them; various values depict fundamental aspects of diversity in human culture and the individuals are influenced by culture and values of a society are so important that they impact on the norms (Kafi, 2006, p.55). The Tanser letters are based on education and remind us the values that people have to learn then in the form of questions and answers. Iranians are obliged to norms and beliefs and in most cases violation of these norms causes to destruction. These values and beliefs are divided into categories:
1-Religious values and beliefs:

-Considering government as holy gift: In this period for legitimating the king orders and prevention of likely rebellions the king has been chosen by Ahouramazda and he is spiritual creature. “He conquered east and then conquered all over the world”(Minavi, 1932, p. 48).

-Hardship and avoiding wordily affairs: In Zoroastrianism it has been ordered to solitude and worship God and avoiding wordily pleasures. “It is fifty years I have fought with my carnal soul and suffered hardship and avoided marriage, collecting properties and living pleasure”(ibid, p.50).

-Survival of soul and meeting souls: Belief in survival of the soul and living after death is one of the main elements of Zoroastrianism. Resurrection day is the time of judgment (Bagheri, 2010, p. 52). “The good souls will be happy and I hear their happiness and I know that the souls will join each other and when we meet each other we tell about our deeds and we become happy”(Minavi, 1932, p. 53).

2- Moral values and beliefs

-Praising wisdom, planning and assigning affairs to wise men: Tanser praises wisdom and logic and the wise man is who preserves the social classes and does not let the inferiors to become great men.

-Praising justice and blaming oppression: The king is establisher of justice and in his opinion justice is putting everything in the place determined by the God.

-Consulting: “Let your soul to accustomed to consulting with me and others”(ibid, p.50).

-Temperance and moderation: “If the person is allowed he obeys his carnal soul and misled, collects money and finally loses and when a rich man becomes poor the king treasury is lost and the princes are captured and the people live in misery”( ibid, p.70).

Arrogance: “An arrogant person becomes disobedience and the disobedient person violets others and the people take revenge and many people are killed”(ibid, p. 73).

3-Folk beliefs and values

-Evil eye: Various beliefs were common among people and they believed in evil eye and this belief has been mentioned in Quran and its accuracy has been approved. “The evils and fairies damage human being and everybody who subjected to evil eye becomes destructed”(ibid, p.73).

-Contracts and transactions

In ancient Iranians opinions the god of sun which is responsible for organizing human life in this world is judicial and it is the god of social order unifying all social classes. Iranians adhered to
their promises. “The promises should be respected whether true or false one. This belief depicts that in their opinion, various social communities, families, regions, and countries were established based on promise and breaching promises led to decline and abolishment”(Mosavi Bojnordi, 2006, p. 307).

Social classes were effective in enacting codes and the rules were based on different social classes. Ardeshir took important steps in improving administrative and financial systems and established codified transactional and commercial and economic rules. In the Tanser letter the king tries to establish new system by enacting new rules to control and preserve his power by improving the people financial, economic and political conditions. “I ordered the common people not purchase the aristocrats lands and properties and I defined their rank and positions”(Minavi, 1932, p. 65).

Share the properties and wealth was done according to agreement. If a man had two wives, they had the same share and it was possible that the man nullified their share but the woman could not nullified her share (Nejad Akbari, 2009, p. 221). In the early years of advent of Zoroastrianism, the women were independent financially and they purchased and transacted lands and properties and they had attorneys who investigated their affairs. Then their position was lost and the poor women preserved their freedom because of commuting among people and the rich women were imprisoned in their homes and they could not commute with men”(Soltani, 2009, p. 4).

- Different classes’ costumes

The costumes of common people were made of wool or cotton and the aristocrats wore silky garments and put long hats and there were signs on their hats. The clergymen wore turban and leather shoes and their garments were long as the kings’ costumes. Their pants were not so loose and some wore tight and some wore loose pants. According to a Chinese traveler, the Iranian women wore loose garments and tied their hair on the forehead and weaved their hair at the back of the head and put artificial flowers made of gold and silver and necklace made of pearl. The aristocrat women wore long silky garment and hat and tight pants and also wore earrings, necklace and ring and they wore dark colored garments (Mehrin, 1971, p. 1981). Ardeshir had enacted strict rules in the appearance of the people: “Aristocrats wore expensive garments and also their wives wore silky clothes and put hats and lived in the palaces and gardens”(Minavi, 1932, p. 69).

- Criticisms

In questions and answers between Tanser and the ruler of Tabaristan, some criticisms are significant. The writer has explored these criticisms eloquently and invited the government for improving social issues. These criticisms are divided into following categories:

- Criticism of religious affairs and the clergymen: In the beginning of the letter, Tanser introduces himself as a clergyman and criticizes the chaotic condition of religion and religious leaders in the society. “I do not interfere in religious rules and introduce unlawful relationship with women, drinking wine and joy. Those who consider unlawful the lawful conduct as lawful
the unlawful act and this is the tradition of the clergymen. They have seen corruptions and ignorance of the thinkers and some of them behave animalistic and some of them have avoided the worldly affairs and some others have destructed oneself for the sake of soul”(Minavi, 1932, p. 51).

-Destruction of local temples: Following criticism of the religious affairs in this letter, Tanser criticizes counteraction of local temples by regions governors. One of the protests of Goshnashb was destruction of temples by the government that Tanser replies to defense of this act. “You mentioned that the king destructed the temples and nobody did as him, you know that after Dara, the head of each tribe made a temple and it was heresy that the king removed it”(ibid, p. 68).

Criticism on unawareness of people on religious thoughts: There was no comprehensive book including religious teachings after attack of Alexander and burning the copies of Avesta and the people had forgotten these thoughts and the society was corrupted and for this reason existence of a kingship advocating religious thoughts and clergymen seemed necessary.

Justice and oppression: In addition to religious criticism, Tanser had had a different perspective on establishing justice in the society. He believed that the people were accustomed to oppression that they avoided justice. Anti-values had been converted into values: “Know that there are two traditions: the first tradition and the last tradition. The first tradition is justice and the last tradition is oppression and the people have been accustomed to cruelty. There is no sign of justice and the man should identify right from wrong and try to abolish oppression”(ibid, p. 55).

Protest against social classes’ imbalance: In his opinion, placing the people in predetermined place is justice. “What is considered significant of the kings’ punishment is punishing the opponents. The people were engaged in their affairs and they never protested against the orders of the rulers and when the people corrupted. They did not obey the king and led to injustice. “We did not hear and see that chastity, content, altruism and advice lead to greed and when they became greedy the enemies approached us and the demons were released and our cities were destructed and the cities were plundered so that the subordinates dominated their masters”(ibid, p. 59).

Conclusion

The results of this research reveal that thoughts and talents are dependent on social conditions and for this reason literary setting and written oeuvres are influenced by social setting. Sociology of literature studies the connection between literature and society and it bridges between literature and sociology and extracts the social concepts and contents from literary works.

In this research, the Tanser letter has been investigated from social perspective and its social issues have been studied. This letter which was written in Sassanid era offers a comprehensive portrait of social evolution. Ardeshir established an integrated government by combining religion and politics and founded a systematic society based on the social classes and each individual had predetermined role. Enrichment of Persian literature including prose and verse has provided a context which various social, cultural norms, values and codes and social classes and ruling body
can be investigated. In this regard, it can be said that thoughts, personality and works of the writers are influenced by society and it reflects the social and cultural characteristics in a period.
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