

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Modern Iranian Medical History through Stories and Memoirs with an Emphasis on the Second Pahlavi Era (1941-1979)

Abstract

The present article has put forward the idea that contemporary Persian realist stories and memoirs contain rare or sometimes unique information about the medical developments in Iran during the transition from traditional medicine to modern medicine, during the modernization of medicine in the Pahlavi era. The author believes that, in Iran, most research performed in the field of medical historiography is based on medical sources and, more recently, on documents whose information gaps can be compensated by information obtained from other fields, such as literature and memoirs. Accordingly, the author has first tried to prove the authenticity and validity of this data for being used in historical research by proposing some theoretical frameworks. Then, by adopting an interdisciplinary approach and analytical method, the researcher attempted to extract the most important topics related to Iranian medical history based on the selected sources.

Key words: Medical history, Iran, Story, Memoirs, Historiography, Traditional Medicine

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Introduction

Years ago, when the author was writing his doctoral dissertation on women and medicine in the Safavid era, he came across a book that changed his view of the type of sources and data analysis in medical history. The book, entitled “Illness as Metaphor”, was written by Susan Sontag (1933-2004). She, a literary theorist and a political activist, died of cancer, and while under treatment, she wrote a book on the metaphorical conceptions of tuberculosis and cancer. Here, she showed how much disease perception as a medical issue could be confused with social perceptions in such a way that it is, at times, impossible to separate these metaphors from the disease itself. One of Sontag’s most remarkable innovations in this work was the numerous references to classic novels and memoirs. This way of authenticating literary sources and memoirs in the discussion of disease inspired the author of this article to ponder how, for example, Iranian literary sources can be used as a basis for analyzing medical developments? Although several articles have been written and published during this time, including “The Impact of literal images in Traditional Medical Texts” (Abdollahi, 2012) and “The Representation of Medicine in the Iranian Constitutionalist Humor (1906-1911): A Socio-Historical Analysis” (Dehghanian, Rastegar, and Arekhi, 2021, pp. 171-184) on the border between literature and medicine, unfortunately, to my best knowledge, Iranian scholars have not paid sufficient attention to this particular issue, and I am glad that I have found the opportunity to give a preliminary answer to this question. In addition to following Sontag’s source-based approach, this paper is theoretically indebted to new perspectives in the general field of historical studies and modern research in medical history. Recent developments in humanities theories, which have, in turn, been influenced by economic, intellectual, and political changes, have significantly changed the direction of scientific writing. One of the crucial features of these emerging currents is the shift of attention from macro-structures to micro-structures. These changes, meanwhile, have not left historiography untouched, and we see how historians’ attention has shifted from the tremendous economic, social, and political structures to ordinary events and people, bringing the story of the forgotten and marginalized features of history to the stage (for details on these developments in the field of historical theories, see: Green, and Troup, 2021). Many of these new theoretical approaches have tested the historiography of medicine and provided deep insights to medical historians.

Moreover, new resources have been added to this field. However, although it has been more than a few decades that these approaches and resources to the world of medical history research have been introduced, we still see that most Iranian researchers follow the first generations of medical historians to organize their research. Of course, it is fair to note that in the wake of these developments, researchers, whose academic backgrounds have been in fields like history, or physicians, who have become acquainted with new historical approaches, have, recently, more used new sources such as documents, journals, and travelogues. Based on the above considerations, the main argument in this paper is that, first, the mainstream of medical historiography, known as the Oslerian school, has generally neglected the people, the lower classes, and the social aspects of medicine. Secondly, with the approach of social medical history, it is possible to write a kind of patient-oriented medical history in which ordinary people and the underprivileged are the main subjects. Thirdly, the two genres of story and memoirs constitute essential sources



of this new approach. To advance these topics, we will first take a brief look at the trends of medical historiography. Then, the social approach of medical history is introduced. After that, epistemological discussions about memoirs and stories are presented, and finally, the medical themes that can be achieved in contemporary Persian memoirs and stories will be categorized and analyzed in terms of research attention.

Trends in Medical Historiography

Modern medical historiography has gone through many ups and downs since its inception in 1929 when the Johns Hopkins Institute for Medical History was inaugurated, but in recent decades it can be said that there have been two primary and secondary trends. If we want to study these two currents briefly in terms of chronological precedence, we must first look at the dominant trend. In this trend, the main topic is medical science, and its scholars are physicians. This physician-centred approach has been the narrator of the lives and careers of eminent physicians, outstanding medical achievements, and medical developments as a “science” (King, 1991, pp. 408-409); For example, works of Hassan Tajbakhsh (1937), Mahmoud Najmabadi (1903-2000) and Mohammad Taghi Mir (1913-1996) fall into this category. This method of medical historiography in the modern age is the result of the attitude and efforts of William Osler (1849-1919), the famous Canadian physician. Osler, one of the pioneers of modern medicine, used medical history as an educational tool in the service of medical science. In fact, it can be said that the medical history was a method for Osler, not a subject (Brandt, 1991, p. 200). The history of medicine, in this view, is the narrator of medical evolution, and only physicians, not anyone else, have the authority to narrate it. In this trend, the pioneers of American medical humanism, including Osler, intended to modify the laboratory and technological aspects of medicine by more focusing on human beings, as was referred to in ancient medical texts. This made the history of medicine very important. In the context of this type of medical history, innovations, and discoveries, methods of diagnosis and treatment, and finally, drugs and, in a word, practical aspects of medicine are examined through the eyes of medical history. In other words, the works produced by this approach study medicine in isolation without considering the influence of cultural and social phenomena. (Kushner, 2008, p. 710)

The dominance of the Oslerian approach to historiography continued until the 1960s. After that, with the emergence of new trends in historiography, especially social history, several academic historians turned to medicine as a platform for studying and analyzing social phenomena and developments. Thus, a sub-stream in medical historiography emerged, which can be called the social history of medicine. Almost all actors in this trend are professional historians. Contrary to the mainstream, they see medicine as something related to the context, in the sense that historical phenomena, including medicine, are interpreted and evaluated in relation to other social, cultural, economic, and political phenomena of the same period. Medicine, in this trend, is not merely a “science”, but a social construct that finds meaning in relation to institutions, social classes and cultural values. In this approach, historical knowledge is influenced by various factors, such as gender, class, culture, thought and politics. In fact, it can be said that in the works created within this trend, there is no trace of medical study as a static and “scientific” field whose objective is restricted to medical education. Many valuable works have been written in



this field, but perhaps the most notable are the works of the famous French philosopher, Michel Foucault. He described hospital, madness, and sexuality, which directly or indirectly relate to medical science, as the subject of innovative research, and showed how social relations and power could affect a science (Porter, 1985, p. 176; Kushner, 2008, p. 711). In a general assessment, despite the fundamental differences between the two trends, they fundamentally need each other and must work together because physicians are unfamiliar with the principles of historiography, source criticism, historical theories, and historical research methods. And academic historians do not know medicine.

Theoretical Considerations

At first glance, it may not seem that the story can be used as a source for medical history research. The most important question that arises might be how reality can be derived from fiction. This and the like questions are meaningful in the context of conventional bibliography of historical research, but art, though intertwined with the element of imagination, has, in recent years, become an important source of historiography. For example, we can refer to the *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, one of the critical sources written by Afsaneh Najmabadi (1946), comprising the paintings of the Qajar period, which indicates the change of gender attitudes in modern Iran. Alternatively, in another example, Nasim Khalili (1981), a researcher of contemporary history and a novelist, presents a new historical narrative of the effects of the oil nationalization movement in her fiction book, *Talay-e Siah dar Mes-e Dastan* (lit. *Black Gold in Copper of Story*). Therefore, with the expansion of the list of sources of historical research, the use of stories in these works of research is no longer far from the mind.

It goes without saying that stories are written in different forms and genres, and hence, they are not expected to reflect reality as it happens. For example, mythological or romantic stories cannot be expected to be based on reality, or the author's experience is reflected in their narratives. However, in this article, the author has scrutinized a genre of story that reflects the writers' interaction with reality. Basically, in terms of form and realism, a short story, in terms of genre, is the most appropriate means of representing reality in fiction. Another important point is that the main subject of realist stories is the mass of people. Unlike romantic storytellers, who often turn away from social problems, such as poverty, malnutrition, poor health, and deprivation, realist writers focus on these issues. Hence, as Payandeh states, "... so we can say that realism is a style of storytelling through which the author tries to give an objective understanding of everyday life, especially the lives of disadvantaged people at a certain time and place" (Payandeh, 2016, p. 31).

In discussing the theoretical aspects of memoirs, it should be said that, in recent years, in the field of historical studies, theoretically and methodologically, the use of memoirs has been considered fruitful. The most fundamental question in using memoirs, as a historical source, like a story, is whether it is trustworthy. Furthermore, whether Memoirs contain historical truth? Memoirs are different from other mental remnants and refer to recollections accumulated through human interaction with reality; they seem so important that they are recorded in mind for years or sometimes forever. In other words, memoirs are events that remain in the mind whose survival depends on the mentality and emotional world of the individual (Kamari, 2010, pp. 28-29). This mental interaction



in the reflection of authentic experiences requires precautions about memoirs. The challenges to memoirs are as valid as other historical sources, and no distinction can be made between memoirs or other historical sources, such as books. However, like other sources, memoir needs to be critiqued before being used in historical research. The main challenge of memoirs can be considered as forgetting the details and inadvertent or intentional distortion of events (Kamari, 2010, p. 38). Based on these considerations, memoirs can be examined from the perspective of historical research and historiography from two angles. First, memoirs, provided narrated with fidelity, and the narrator is accurate and moral, can be one of the primary sources of historiography. According to the second view, the main sources of historiography are documents and historiographies, and memoirs can be secondary reliable data. These two attitudes can be combined as follows: Memoirs, provided they are written without inadvertent or intentional manipulation and confusion caused by forgetfulness, can be one of the main historical sources, primarily if they are based on accurate sources or notes (Kamari, 2010, p. 78).

Medical Themes in Stories and Memoirs

The main purpose of this article is to evaluate stories and memoirs as a source for medical history research. Therefore, based on the above theoretical considerations, the researcher has tried to pursue this issue in the framework of Persian realist short stories and contemporary Iranian memoirs. Since it was not possible to examine all the stories and memoirs in this article, an attempt has been made to examine a selection of the most relevant ones. Persian short stories represent the social status of the Iranian lower class. Some of the writers of these stories, who were under the influence of leftist doctrines, tried to relate the hardship of the lower class to the process of modernization of the second Pahlavi era (Mir Abedini, 1998, p. 176). Some of these stories describe the lives of villagers and workers, and others deal with the Iranian middle class, so these stories contain valuable and unexplored information about the health and medical conditions of the general public in the period mentioned. Although the memoirs of Iranians are the reflections of the literate and elites, they, in various ways, exhibit a lack of health and medical facilities or issues arising from the modernization of medicine and public health. After being critically evaluated, these memoirs can be used in historical studies.

1- Problems with Having Access to a Doctor and Medical Facilities

Regardless of the people's attitude towards modern medicine, one of the factors that hindered them from having access to medicine was the poor condition of roads as well as poor means of transportation, especially in rural areas. Social story writers have repeatedly mentioned this point in their works. Nasim Khaksar, in *Ostokhan va Dandanha-ye Rizo Dorosht-e Koosheh* (lit. *Shark Bones and Teeth*) from the collection of *Nan va Gol* (lit. *Bread and Flower*), describes the effect of rough rural roads on increasing the mortality rate in small villages in southern Iran. His story is the tragic narrative of a woman who has a serious illness. (Khaksar, 1978, pp. 19-21). In *Marg dar Paeiz* (lit. *Death in the Fall*), Akbar Radi narrates a patient who cannot be moved easily, but when those around him realize that his condition is deteriorating, they decide to take him to the nearest city clinic despite the bad route and vehicle. (Radi, 2007, pp. 103-104). Other authors have similar narratives of such patients on the road. Among them is Houshang Moradi Kermani, who



in *Shoma keh Gharibeh Nistid* (lit. *You Are Not a Stranger*), narrating his grandmother's illness in winter, writes that when the patient could no longer sit on the donkey's back, she was forced to spend the day and night in the winter blizzard and snow on the way to Kerman. (Moradi Kermani, 2017, p. 50). Ali Ashraf Darvishian (1941-2017) is one of the social story writers who have written about the effects of poor road conditions and the long distance of medical centers on patient mortality. He has a story, "Hataf" in which he talks about the death of a mother and her little daughter on their way to a city clinic (Darvishian, 1957, pp. 40, 52). In his famous book, *Azadaran-e Bayal* (lit. *Mourners of Bayal*), Saedi focuses on the illness of one of the characters, Naneh Ramazan. He points out that due to the difficulty of reaching the city and modern medical facilities, a patient's transfer to the hospital was always the last option, and that is why the early stages of the disease were limited to prescribing herbal medicine and traditional methods of treatment (Saedi, 1976, pp. 15-18). Mansour Yaghouti (1949), a writer from Kermanshah, Jafar Shahri (1914-1999), a famous memoirist and journalist of Tehran, and Nasser Moazzen (1944), a writer from the southern school, wrote about the rough roads and poor means of transportation and their impact on the access of the lower and most rural people of Iran to medical facilities in the second Pahlavi era (Yaghouti, n.d., p. 54; Shahri, 1968, pp. 103-105; Moazzen, 1973, p. 88).

2- Fascination with Modern Medicine

Although many years had passed since the arrival of modern medicine in Iran in the historical period under study, there were conflicting views about modern medicine in villages and sometimes in cities. One of the central attitudes was the fascination with this type of medicine, which perhaps should be sought in the light of the dominance of the discourse of Western modernism on Iran. In his memoirs, *Afsaneh-ye Zendegi* (lit. *The Legend of Life*), Nosratollah Bastan (1903-1982), one of the most famous contemporary Iranian physicians, mentions the villagers' fascination with the urban physician and modern medicine. He wrote that there were people who were not ill but still requested the doctor to prescribe some medicine. Alternatively, many patients, assuming that certain medicine would cure them more quickly, urged the doctor to prescribe medications that were suitable for the final stages of treatment (Bastan, 1965, p. 85). In his memoirs of old Tehran, Shahri also reports that people were greatly interested in going to the modern American clinic, mainly because of the kind behavior of the staff and the medicines given free of charge in that clinic (Shahri, 1999, p. 295). Of course, there were some negative attitudes towards modern medicine, which will be explained in the next section. Apart from these negative attitudes, the efforts of physicians sent to rural areas succeeded in forming a positive image of this type of medicine. In "Smiling Tatar", which is based on the author's own experience, Saedi describes the appropriate conditions of the village clinic and how, with the efforts of the doctor and the clinic staff, the clinic was clean and disinfected, and there was a standard and adequate space for the doctors to treat their patients (Saedi, 2018a, pp. 159-160).

3- Negative Attitudes towards Modern Medicine

Although, in the beginning, modern medicine was welcomed in Iran, including the rural areas, people, mostly in urban areas, gradually developed a negative attitude toward



modern medicine. Faghiri, the social writer of Shiraz, recounts in his memoirs how his young brother, Masoud, who went to the doctor because of appendicitis, became infected and died due to the lack of sterile medical equipment. He goes on to say that this doctor was known among the people as “the butcher”, and because Massoud fell ill on holiday, he had no choice but to refer to that doctor (Mojahednaghi, 2014, p. 9). Shahri also refers to some hospitals in Tehran, known as “butcheries, describes these hospitals”, compared to the high-quality foreign ones, as having complicated and poor conditions. (Shahri, 1999, p. 297). Elsewhere in her memoirs, he writes about the misconception common among women; he points out that women assume that in a hospital, a drug is injected to women who were due to giving birth, causing their milk to dry out; they hold that this is done so that dry milk companies could sell their products (Shahri, 1999, p. 521).

Perhaps the sharpest critique of modern medicine is *Sangi bar Gouri* (lit. *A Stone on a Grave*), one of the well-known books of Jalal al-e Ahmad (1923-1969). This book is an open and honest account of the infertility of him and his wife, Simin Daneshvar (1921-2011); here, the author has, at times, made some descriptions of infertility treatment done on them, descriptions unparalleled, in terms of frankness in Iranian memoirs. In these memoirs, the narrator, despairing of repeated treatments, reached the point of insanity. Although he was an intellectual, he was so frustrated with modern medicine that he turned to traditional medicine or folk remedies. He strongly attacked the unsanitary conditions of the laboratories and accused the doctors of being after money (Al-e Ahmad, 2005a, pp. 13, 16-17). Generally speaking, Al-Ahmad has employed this negative approach to modern medicine in his stories. For example, in *Daftarche Bimeh* (lit. *Insurance Booklet*), he writes from the words of one of the characters in the story that doctors are businessmen (Al-e Ahmad, 2005b, pp. 79-80).

In his memoirs, Nosratollah Bastan, as a physician, also spoke about the negative view of people on the modern institution, the hospital. Bastan told the story of a man who was struck by erysipelas, and Bastan insisted that he be hospitalized, but “he refused to do so and did not consider his condition serious. He was over fifty years old and managed to treat himself at home with traditional medicine. I was certain that he would not survive the disease. To my great surprise, I saw him walking in the street a few days later “ (Bastan, 1965, p. 80).

4- The Status of Hospitals and Medical Centers

Contemporary Persian stories and memoirs often reflected negative images of the hospitals of the Pahlavi period. Saedi, for example, as a physician and novelist, in *Ashghal-dooni* (Lit. *Garbage*), gave a dark picture of the relations between the hospital staff in the second Pahlavi period (Saedi, 2018b, pp. 37-38). Gholamhossein Mosaddegh (1906-1990), a physician and the son of former Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, also in his memoirs, *Dar Kenar-e Pedaram Mosaddegh* (lit. *With My Father, Mosaddegh*) spoke of the competition existing between doctors educated in the United States and Europe in hospitals. According to this memoir, there was intense competition between them (Mosaddegh, 1990, p. 26).

Interesting information about the status of special treatment centers for marginalized and vulnerable groups can also be retrieved in the memoirs. For example, we can refer to the memoirs written by Mahmoud Zand-e Moghaddam about the *Qaleh* (lit. *The*



Castle) or *Shahr-e-Now* (Lit. *The New Town*), describing the medical center which was dedicated to taking care of the health status of prostitutes in Tehran. His descriptions of the abnormal conditions of this medical center and prostitutes, who work under the minimum necessary standards and sometimes suffer from incurable diseases or leave their unwanted children, are unfortunate and unique in terms of social medical history (Zand-e Moghaddam, 1957, pp. 56-59). Despite negative information existing about the condition of hospitals, we have some positive and promising information. One of these topics is charitable assistance to patients in need of hospitalization. For example, Gholam-Hossein Mosaddegh, in his memoirs, provides interesting information about the cooperation present among the *Oghaf* institution (the endowment institution), hospitals, and charities: "This hospital, which was the endowment of my grandmother, Najma al-Saltaneh, was established in 1928. The hospital was mainly funded by endowments, including the income of nearby shops. There were twenty free beds for the hospitalization and treatment of the poor people" (Mosaddegh, 1990, p. 23). Elsewhere in the memoirs, Mosaddegh mentions the efforts of a group of physicians to establish the Association for the Support of Mothers and Infants in 1940. This center was established with the idea and help of doctors as well as people, such as Abolghasem Nafisi, Sedigheh Dowlatabadi, Mansoureh Matin Dftari, Hajar Tarbiat, Valiollah Moazzami, Davari, Motameni and several other doctors. The purpose of establishing this organization was to help the poor and needy people (Mosaddegh, 1990, p. 29).

5- Medical Education System

One of the most interesting themes in the memoirs that can compensate for our information gap is related to the medical education system at the beginning of the arrival of modern medicine to Iran. Moreover, the memoirs of the famous physician, Nosratollah Bastan, are valuable in this regard. These memoirs show that it is unreasonable to expect physicians to be competent in the early years of modern medicine: "Medical school today is very different from twenty-five years ago. At the beginning of its establishment, the Iranian School of Medicine was limited to a few rooms, four meters by five meters or three meters by four meters on the same floor level, located in the northern part of the Dar al-Fonun. At that time, there were some Iranian and European professors of medicine. A few paper sculptures and some bone fragments imported from Europe were also used instead of the modern dissection room and laboratories. Therefore, the anatomy lesson was limited to a pamphlet that one of the professors used to translate from a French book at night and dictated to students the following day. Other courses, such as pharmacology and physiology, had no practical work at all and were limited to the pamphlets translated by the relevant professor" (Bastan, 1965, p. 65). Of course, Bastan goes on to say that many medical students tried to add to their medical knowledge on a self-taught basis to make up for the shortcomings (Bastan, 1965, p. 66).

6- Medical Advances and Innovations

Innovation and progress made in medicine are also reflected in memoirs and stories. For example, Gholamhossein Mosaddegh begins his memoirs by criticizing surgery in Iran but goes on to point out that with the return of highly educated people from Switzerland, it is hoped that dynamism and progress can also be achieved in this field. He has



explicitly stated that surgery in Iranian hospitals was not successful until the first years of the 1910s, and that major surgeries were rarely performed successfully. As a Swiss-educated gynecologist, he continues to talk about his efforts to transfer his experience and knowledge in surgery to Iranian physicians from 1935 onwards. As he said, at that time, no major surgeries were performed in hospitals affiliated with the medical school, and doctors were generally worried about post-op infection. Of course, there were also efficient and experienced surgeons who trained young surgeons in hospitals. In the circumstances and facilities of that day, they became the source of important services in the advancement of medical knowledge. The most prominent of these surgeons was Yousef Mir (1882-1968). Dr. Mir came to Iran after the First World War. After the establishment of the University of Tehran, he was elected as a professor of surgery in the medical school and the head of the surgery department of the university's large hospital (Mosaddegh, 1990, p. 36). Mosaddegh also mentions and praises the role of Yahya Adl (1908-2002) in the development of surgery in Iran: "Dr. Adl trained dozens of qualified surgeons. It must be said that the progress of the school of Adl coincided with the discovery of antibiotics and miraculous antiseptic drugs, and this emerging phenomenon brought about a great change in surgery" (Mosaddegh, 1990, pp. 36-38).

Conclusion

In recent years, historical developments in modern and traditional medicine have been the subject of much research and study. However, many of these studies are written mainly by physicians with a medical perspective, relying on medical resources. This paper sought to show that there is valuable information in contemporary fictional sources and memoirs that can be applied to contemporary medical history research via employing some interdisciplinary approaches and new theoretical considerations, the sort of information that has so far been either ignored or less seriously considered. Due to the vast field of contemporary fiction and memoirs, an attempt was made to select and analyze among the fictional literature the most realistic stories that reflect the reality of the society and from the memoirs of those memoirs whose authors were physicians or had medical experience. Based on these sources, we extracted repetitive medical themes in two genres of fiction and memoirs that can significantly compensate for the shortcomings of contemporary medical history in other sources. Topics, such as the medical education system, the attitude of ordinary people to modern medicine, the evolution of modern surgery in Iran, the conditions of hospitals at the beginning of the modern period, especially in the Pahlavi era, were among the significant topics that were extracted and studied from these sources.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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