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Classical Persian Literature: Fiction, Didactics or Intuitive Truth?

“Fiction” is often seen as a central for “literature” in a narrow sense (*belles-lettres*). This is problematic in the context of what is known as “Classical Persian Literature”. First of all, narrative prose, that by definition would come close to a modern idea of fiction, are not considered part of “fine literature” (*adab*) in the Classical tradition. Secondly, the wide array of such texts that have been passed on to modern times, in oral as well as in written form, were hardly ever thought of as being fictive stories but rather as being narratives of adventures and events that really had taken place somewhere and sometime. This would also include stories of demons, witches, magicians and fairies as well as animal fables. Many of those stories would have a strong didactic bent while others are more clearly meant for entertainment – however, often both at the same time.

When we consider the very rich legacy of Classical Persian narrative poetry, things become even more complicated. Such epic poems basically told stories about a heroic past or romances of famous loving couples. The possibility of seeing those stories as fiction hardly crossed the minds of the composers/performers or their readers/listeners. Furthermore, an aesthetic element is added to the narrative contents. The elaborated poetic form and the inventiveness of the imagery and metaphors become an important or even dominant component of the literary work. At the same time the didactic dimension remains central.

A final complication is added by the Sufi (mystical) reading that gradually permeated much of Persian literature from the 11th century CE onwards. This is particularly evident in poetry, and my paper will develop this problématique starting from the famous parable of the elephant found in the great 13th century *Masnavi* by Djalâl od-din Rumi.