



AFRĀŠTA, MOḤAMMAD-‘ALĪ

AFRĀŠTA, MOḤAMMAD-‘ALĪ (1287-1338 Š./1908-59), poet, writer and satirist. Like his father Jawād, he was a native of Rašt, while his mother was from a peasant family of Gīlān, a fact which explains his wide knowledge of the customs, manners, and language of the Gīlakī peasants. Before finishing school, he was forced to work in such capacities as teacher, cashier, and chauffeur; his difficult childhood figures as a theme in many of his verses. He established his identity as a writer and poet after the Allied occupation of Iran (August, 1941), when freedom of expression became possible. Prior to this date he had gained some reputation as a poet in the Gīlakī dialect in his native town. His pithy satirical pieces began to be published after World War II and immediately became widely known. He was a member of the Tūda party and followed the “social realist” school of writing; thus he was opposed to “art for art’s sake”—literature had to be used as a political tool to promote class consciousness and fight oppression. He defended this viewpoint at the 1945 Congress of Iranian Poets and Writers.

In 1949 Afrāšta founded a weekly newspaper called *Čelengar* (“blacksmith” in the Gīlakī dialect). It published humorous and satirical verse, always with a political message and mostly written by himself; occasionally it included Gīlakī verses and short fiction. The paper’s attitude toward the working classes and peasants was expressed in its motto, “Let this pen, this hand break/If they shirk the cause of the poor.” On June 2, 1953, after the 12th number, *Čelengar* was banned, but Afrāšta managed to publish eleven more issues under different names such as *Jājrūd*, *Šabčērāg*, etc., always indicating that the new



paper was a continuation of “the accursed and offensive *Čelengar*.” After the fall of Mošaddeq in 1953, newspapers were banned, and Afrāšta went underground. Fearing for his life, he fled to the USSR in 1954, and from there he went to Bulgaria. Though far from his native land and in poor health, Afrāšta continued his journalistic works. He wrote in the Bulgarian satirical paper *Stershel* (“Hornet”), and actively published his works in Bulgarian-Turkish publications. Under the pseudonym of Ḥasan Šarīf, he published a collection of stories in Bulgarian about Iranian and also Bulgarian daily life entitled “The shah’s nose” (Sophia, 1963). He died in Sophia on May 6, 1959.

The first collection of Afrāšta’s poetry, which included his best verses from 1944-45, was published in a slender volume entitled *Ay goftī* (“Well said”) in 1950 by the Tūda party. After the 1953 coup none of the works of Afrāšta was published in Iran, and it was not until very recently that some collections of his poetry were reprinted. The most comprehensive edition, by M. A. Behādīn, is entitled *Bargozīda-ye aš‘ār-e Fārsī va Gīlakī-e Moḥammad-‘Alī Afrāšta* (Tehran, 1358 Š./1979). His fiction was published in a volume called *Maktab-e now* (“The new school,” Tehran 1331 Š./1952). It comprises social realist short stories about the common people in simple, sometimes essay-style prose. He employed the same themes in occasional efforts at playwriting. But his true claim to literary recognition rests with his poetry, which combines deadly serious political intent and mordant wit with a gay, bantering tone and playful masculine rhymes. His graceful and witty Gīlakī poetry has made him one of the most respected poets of his native Gīlān.

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