



ĀL-E AḤMAD, JALĀL

ĀL-E AḤMAD, JALĀL (1302-48 Š./1923-69), well-known writer and social critic. In a brief autobiographical sketch completed in 1346 Š./1967 but published only after his death (*Maṭalan sarḥ-e aḥwālāt*) Āl-e Aḥmad describes his conservatively religious and moderately well-to-do family; his father's strong religious principles led him to close his court of record (*maḥẓar*) rather than submit to government supervision. He wanted his son to follow a career in the bazaar, and Jalāl's formal education would have ended with elementary school had he not chosen to register—without his father's knowledge—for evening classes at the *Dār-al-fonūn*, while he worked days as, variously, a watchmaker, electrician, and leather merchant. Finishing in 1322 Š./1943, he went on to the Faculty of Letters of Tehran Teachers' College, graduating in 1325 Š./1946, and in the following year he was hired as a school teacher by the Ministry of Education. He was obliged to continue to work as a teacher throughout his life, despite the increasing respect and popularity he gained as a writer—like other serious writers, he was not able to support himself with his pen.

Toward the end of his first year at college Āl-e Aḥmad (together with a number of his classmates) joined the Tūda party, and in the course of the next four years he rose to membership in the party committee for Tehran. He was both a spokesman for its policies and an editor of its publications, such as *Mardom* and *Rahbar*. In 1326 Š./1947, he left the Tūda party along with Ḳalīl Malekī and a number of other intellectuals in protest against the Soviet invasion of Azarbaijan, and for a few years he stayed out of politics. But beginning in 1329



Š./1950 he gave active support to Moṣaddeq and his policy of nationalizing the oil industry. To further this aim he joined in the founding of the Toilers' Party (*ḥezb-e zaḥmatkešān-e mellat-e Īrān*), and later (1331 Š./1952), he helped form the Nīrū-ye Sevvom ("Third force") party with other dissidents from the Zaḥmatkešān. Āl-e Aḥmad was editor and a principal writer for this party's publications, including *Nīrū-ye sevvom* and *'Elm o zendagī*.

Āl-e Aḥmad's published writings fill more than twenty volumes and include travel journals, translations, village studies, essays, and reviews, not to mention the works of fiction for which he is most admired. Several completed manuscripts—among them the journal of his visit to the U.S.S.R. in the summer of 1343 Š./1964, a long story called *Sang-ī bar gūr-ī* ("A stone upon a grave"), and a collection of short stories, *Nasl-e jaḍīd* ("The new generation")—were left unpublished or only partially published at his death.

Āl-e Aḥmad's first published story, "Zīārat" ("The pilgrimage"), appeared in the Nowrūz issue of *Soḡan* in 1324 Š./1945. An immediate critical success, it was republished at the end of the same year in his first collection of stories, *Dīd o bāzdīd* ("The exchange of visits"). Three more collections of stories followed in the course of the next decade: *Az ranj-ī ka mībarīm* ("From our suffering") in 1326 Š./1947, *Se-tār* ("The sitar") in 1327 Š./1948, and *Zan-e zīādī* ("The superfluous woman") in 1331 Š./1952. The critic Bozorg Alavi describes these stories as detailed sketches from the ordinary events of daily life. Drawing attention both to Āl-e Aḥmad's anti-religious bias and to his skill in making it clear implicitly, Alavi likens him to a photographer who can convey the whole complex emotional world of ordinary people by the careful selection and arrangement of ordinary snapshots (*Geschichte*, p. 221).

Āl-e Aḥmad turned to the composition of longer works of fiction with *Sargodašt-e kandūhā* ("The tale of the beehives") in 1333 Š./1954, and then *Modīr-e madrasa* ("The school principal," 1337 Š./1958), *Nūn wa'l-qalam* ("The letter N and the pen," 1340 Š./1961), and *Nefrīn-e zamīn* ("The cursing of the land," 1346 Š./1967). These long stories or novelettes have more extended plots than the earlier short stories, but share with them an emphasis on incident, a preference for colloquial and idiomatic language, and an understated and indirect style of characterization that reveals little of the psychological and emotional depths of the individuals portrayed. In these works Āl-e Aḥmad takes two quite different approaches to narrative structure. *Modīr-e madrasa* and *Nefrīn-e zamīn* are both first person narratives in which events are described as the narrator experiences them, while *Sargodašt-e kandūhā* and



Nūn wa'l-qalam adapt the traditional folk tale to the ends of modern fiction. Reprinted repeatedly since its first publication, *Modīr-e madrasa* is surely Āl-e Aḥmad's most widely admired work. It is the chronicle of a single year that an elementary school teacher spends as the principal of a small new school on the sparsely settled fringe of Tehran. His encounters with teachers, custodians, students, parents, and other members of the community in the course of the year are presented as a series of vivid and pointed sketches, like those in Āl-e Aḥmad's short stories. Here they fit together to provide a harsh indictment of a school system riddled with sloth and dishonesty, and a community indifferent to the real needs of education. *Nefrīn-e zamīn* is a kind of sequel to *Modīr-e madrasa*: The same protagonist is transported to a village school, this time as a teacher, not a principal. In *Nefrīn-e zamīn*, however, the ethnographer and social critic have triumphed over the novelist. Informative as it is about village life and Āl-e Aḥmad's economic theories, it is less successful as fiction.

Both *Sargodašt-e kandūhā* and *Nūn wa'l-qalam*, are political allegories. In the former the substitution of honey for oil and bees for people veils allusions to the oil nationalization crisis; in the latter the choice of a remote historical setting makes it possible for the author to offer his views on the recent history of parties and government in Iran. *Sargodašt-e kandūhā* is no more than a children's tale whose topical allusions give it momentarily a more serious interest. *Nūn wa'l-qalam*, however, is a substantial and engrossing narrative that has an appeal beyond its allegorical message. It is a successful piece of historical fiction, and deserves to be ranked with the best of Āl-e Aḥmad's works (Hillmann, "Āl-e Aḥmad's Fictional Legacy").

Among Āl-e Aḥmad's many works of non-fiction, his best known is his famous attack on the influence of "western" culture in Iran, *Ġarbzadagī* ("Plagued by the West"). Although *Ġarbzadagī* has more the quality of polemic than of reasoned historical argument (cf. Āšūrī, "Hošyārī-e tārikī"), it gives eloquent voice to the widespread belief that Iranian culture is endangered by the forces for change now at work within it, and that the intellectuals should be less eager to accept western ideas uncritically. This latter idea was developed further in his *Ġedmat va kīānat-e rowšanfekrān* ("The services and disservices of the intellectuals").

Āl-e Aḥmad also composed a large number of works that may be described in general as personal narratives. This category includes both his many travel accounts and his ethnographic studies. Although these works have received little critical attention, they form a significant part of the corpus of his writings



both in style and content. Āl-e Aḥmad was an uncertain master of fictional character. Indeed, most of his fiction is cast in the form of first-person narratives in which the division between author and protagonist is paper-thin. He appears at his most engaging and persuasive in these works where he can dispense with the need to wear a fictional mask. His ethnographic studies also performed the valuable service of introducing urban writers to the world of rural Iran, and so helped bring about rapid and continuing expansion of the scope of modern Persian fiction.

The two elements of Āl-e Aḥmad's work that appear to have made the greatest impression on his younger contemporaries are his sense of social commitment and his prose style. Āl-e Aḥmad, who was well read in such modern French writers as Camus, Sartre, and Céline, was also a careful student of Persian literature, both classical and modern. From these varied sources he developed a vivid, idiomatic style that is true to the rhythms of colloquial speech and yet as richly suggestive as classical prose.

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