



ALAVI, BOZORG

ALAVI, BOZORG (Bozorg 'Alavi, b. Tehran, 13 Bahman 1282 Š./2 February 1904; d. Berlin, 28 Bahman 1375 Š./17 February 1997; [FIGURE 1](#), [FIGURE 2](#)), leftist writer and one of the most noted Persian novelists of the 20th century, whose works were banned in Iran from 1953 to 1979.

Bozorg (registered as Sayyed Mojtabā) was brought up in a merchant family with an established record of political activity (Aḥmadi, p. 47). His grandfather, Hajj Sayyed Moḥammad Šarrāf, supported the Constitutional Movement, and represented the merchants' guild in Iran's first parliament (*majles*; see [CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION](#) i and ii). Alavi's father, Sayyed Abu'l-Ḥasan, too was involved with constitutionalist politics. He travelled to Germany for business and there joined the Iranian Nationalist Committee (Komita-ye mellīyun-e Iran), headed by Sayyed Ḥasan Taqizāda (Taqizāda, pp. 479), editor and publisher of *Kāva* (1916-22), a reformist and nationalistic journal covering political, cultural, scientific and literary subjects, with a strong pro-European, particularly pro-German orientation (Browne, IV, pp. 483-88). Upon completing one of his clandestine trips to Iran in 1923, Sayyed Abu'l-Ḥasan took his two sons with him back to Germany (Mo'meni, p. 255). In 1925, Sayyed Abu'al-Ḥasan and his older son, Morteżā, joined Aḥmad Asadi, and [Taqi Arāni](#) (1902-40; see [COMMUNISM](#) i and ii), to establish the Revolutionary Republican Faction of Iran (Ferqa-ye jomhuri-e enqelābi-e Iran), whose mission and agenda were set forth in 1927 in a document entitled *Bayān-e ḥaqq* (Bahārlu, 1999, pp. 3-35; Behnām, p. 72). Sayyed Abu'l-Ḥasan was also the author of *Rejāl-e 'ašr-e mašruṭiyat* (Notables of the Constitutional Era,



ed., Iraj Afšār, Tehran, 1984). He committed suicide in 1927 in Berlin.

In 1931, Morteżā 'Alavi founded the journal *Peykār* in Berlin, of which fifteen issues were published (Šākeri, pp. 161-2). He took refuge in Russia after protestations by the Iranian government led to his expulsion. A victim of Stalinist purges, he was imprisoned and died later in a prison camp in the then Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan (N. 'Alavi, p. 10).

Bozorg Alavi's education began at a traditional elementary school (*maktab-kāna*) located in Tehran's main bazaar, and continued at the more modern schools of Aqdasiya, and *Dār al-fonun*. His political activities began in high school, when he participated in demonstrations against the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919 (see [GREAT BRITAIN iv. BRITISH INFLUENCE IN PERSIA, 1900-21](#)), proposed by Woṭuq-al-Dawla, the prime minister (Ahmadi, 1997, p. 57).

Alavi continued his education in Germany and developed a lasting interest in Western literature; he was drawn particularly to German romanticism. Suppressing his passion for journalism, he studied education and psychology to become a teacher, as advised by his father (Bahārlu, p. 67), graduating from the University of Munich in 1928 (O'Kane, p. 2; Raffat, p. 99). His close contacts in Germany with noted Iranian scholars, Ḥasan Taqizāda (1878-1970), Moḥammad Qazvini (1877-1949), and [Moḥammad 'Ali Jamālzāda](#) (ca. 1892-1996), inspired him to study classical Persian literature. He also developed in this period a lasting relationship with Taqi Arāni.

To make a living after his father's suicide in 1927, Alavi worked for a short while as a translator at the Iranian Embassy in Germany. He returned to Iran on his brother's urging, to live with his family (N. 'Alavi, p. 27). In 1928, he was employed as instructor of German at the Technical School (*Honarestān-e šan'ati*) of Shiraz, and embarked on his literary career in earnest. He translated selections from Friedrich von Schiller's (1759-1805) play *Die Jungfrau von Orleans* (1801) for a local newspaper. The complete text of the play, entitled *Dušiza-ye Orleān*, was published in 1933, with an introduction by [Sadeq Hedayat](#) (1903-1951), renowned Persian novelist. The next year, he accompanied a German surveyor as interpreter and guide on a trip to Gilān. The trip inspired his best-known short story "Gila mard," which was published several years later in the collection *Nāmahāva dāstānhā-ye digar* (Letters and other stories, 1952). "Gila mard" was translated into English by Manoochehr Mousavi as, 'A Man from Gilan,' in 1976. His first short stories appeared in this

period in *Parvareš*. Years later in an interview with Rāmin Jahānbeglu, Alavi described these stories as “very romantic”; they were never included in short story collections published later in his life (Jahānbeglu, p. 147).

In 1929, when teaching German at Tehran Technical School, he met with Nimā Yušij (1896-1959), pioneer of modernist Persian poetry, who taught French in the same school. During this time, he translated George Bernard Shaw's (1856-1950) *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1928), as *Kasb o kār-e Kānom-e Warren*, staged under the direction of 'Abd al-Ḥosayn Nušin (Aḥmadi, p. 193). At the instigation of Sa'īd Nafisi (1895-1976) noted Persian scholar, Alavi translated selections from Theodor Nöldeke's (1836-1930) *Das Iranische Nationalepos* (Berlin, 1920). The translations appeared in 1930 in *Šarq*, a literary journal published in Tehran by Moḥammad Ramazāni (1904-67), proprietor of the Kolāla-ye kāvar Publishing House, which boasted among members of its editorial committee several key figures of Iran's literary elite. Alavi's complete translation of Theodor Nöldeke's opus on Iran's national epic was later published by Tehran University Press (Mo'assasa-ye entešārāt-e dānešgāh-e Tehrān) in 1948, entitled *Ḥamāsa-ye melli-e Iran*, with an introduction by Sa'īd Nafisi. He also wrote an article on Nietzsche for *Ārmān* monthly (nos. 8-10, pp. 278-84) in 1931.

In the 1930s, the towering presence of Sadeq Hedayat overwhelmed Iran's literary life, and Alavi eagerly sought his friendship. Hedayat and Alavi, along with two other likeminded friends, Mojtabā Minovi, and Mas'ud Farzād (1906-1981), who were credited by Parviz Nātel Kānlari (1916-1991), noted Persian scholar and poet, as the pioneers of modern Persian literature (Kānlari, p. 383; Sepānlu, p. 103), formed the so-called Rab'a “Foursome,” an informal group which was primarily concerned with introducing Western ideas and literary genres to Iranian audiences and crafting a modern colloquial language for literary expression (Kānlari, p. 383; Bahārlu, pp. 141-2). The term *Rab'a* (a misappropriation from Arabic) was adopted at the suggestion of Farzād, as a witty distinction from *Odabā-ye sab'a* (the seven men of letters), which referred to a group of older, traditionalist literati of the time (Minovi, pp. 457-60). Rab'a's scornful ridicule of literary, religious, and less frequently political conventions, is encapsulated in *Vaḡ-vaḡsāḥāb* (Mr. Bow Wow, 1933), a collection of humorous parodies, co-authored by Hedayat and Farzād (Katouzian, p.122).

During these formative years, Alavi oscillated between the poles of Hedayat and Arāni. He shared with Hedayat a deep love for ancient Iran and its



glorious history, and a consequent contempt for its foreign invaders. The sentiment was prevalent among the nation's modernist elite in the post World War I period, and was propagandized as Pahlavi state ideology in subsequent decades (Ricks, p. 275; Meskub, pp. 25-31). Alavi also tread in Hedayat's footsteps when drawing on theories and techniques of Freudian psychoanalysis in his early writings. The melancholic and confused characters of *Čamadān* (Suitcase, 1935), which brought him fame as an author of modern fiction, are particularly potent examples of the underlying yet subtle Freudian influence. Alavi's sense of estrangement from his father is well reflected in the eponymous story of this collection, a tale of triangular relations set in Berlin, with the narrator and his father in opposition and rivalry for the love of a Russian girl (Kānlari, p. 385; Wickens, p. 296).

Under Arāni's tutelage, on the other hand, Alavi, who was already familiar with Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, was drawn further to the West-European Marxist ideology. Later in life, however, he looked back with remorse at his politicized years: "It led to nowhere... It blocked my way to be a writer" (Alavi, p. 100). The oscillation of Alavi between Hedayat and Arāni, as commented by a critic of the next generation, brought him to the forefront of the two most important literary and political movements of the 20th century Persia. It is unfortunate, however, that their towering presence overshadowed and undermined the contributions of their disciples, Alavi included (Golširi, p. 502-3).

In February 1933, Arāni, along with Alavi, and [Iraj Eskandari](#) (1907-1985), another prominent member of Iran's intelligentsia with leftist leanings, founded the periodical *Donyā* (The World), the first theoretically oriented Marxist journal published in Persia. Alavi's translation of Stefan Zweig's (1881-1942) short novel *Brief Einer Unbekannten* was published in *Donyā* as "Golhā-ye safid: Nāma-ye yek zan-e nāšenās," under the pseudonym of FereyduN Nākodā. He also penned several articles on psychology and art for the journal, all marked by his engagement with leftist ideology and psychoanalytic theories (Mo'meni, p. 169). *Donyā* was banned after twelve issues, in June 1935.

In the spring of 1937, Alavi was arrested on account of his affiliation with communist groups and propagation of Marxism. He was sentenced to seven years in prison. In prison, Alavi and other disciples of Arāni, who died in jail on 4 January 1940, formed a group, called the Group of Fifty Three People (Goruh-e panjāh o se nafar). With the Allied occupation of Iran in 1941

most members of the Group were released. Soon after they founded Iran's Communist Tudeh Party, and elected Alavi, still in prison, to its Central Committee. At the first provincial conference of the Tudeh Party in the autumn of 1942, however, Alavi resigned from his position and from then on shunned administrative duties and dedicated his efforts to promoting Tudeh Party's agenda by writing articles and publishing leaflets. He also took a job with the Perso-Soviet Society of Cultural Relations (Anjoman-e ravābeṭ-e farhangi-e Irān o Etteḥād-e Jamāhir-e Šowravi), and simultaneously, translated World War II news for the British Embassy in Iran; a cooperation that lasted for the duration of the war.

Soon after his release in 1941, Alavi published his *Varaq-pārahā-ye zendān* (tr. by Donne Raffat as 'Scrap-Papers from Prison,' 1985; [FIGURE 3](#)), a collection of five tales detailing the hopes and disappointments of life in prison during the reign of Rezā Shah (1925-41). The collection was praised for the musical quality of its language, abundance of imageries and brilliant character study (Kamshad, p. 116). The publication of his *Panjāh o se nafar* (The fifty three people, 1943, [FIGURE 4](#)), the account of life in prison as experienced collectively with his likeminded fellow inmates, caused a great stir among the intelligentsia (O'Kane, p. 3). Some commentators linked the publication of the book with the increased appeal of the Tudeh Party's platform in Iran (Kāma-i, p. 279) and criticized it for occasioning the gradual transformation of Tudeh leaders into mythological figures (Golširi, p. 503).

Alavi, 'Ali Dašti (1894-1982), and later Maḥmud E'temādzāda (known as Behādin, 1915-2006) among others, are credited with being the first Persian writers to describe prison life in an objectively realistic manner (Mir'ābedini, p. 221), thus making a new departure from the classical genre of prison poetry (*ḥabsiyāt*). Alavi's influence can be detected on later writings of the same genre (Raffat, pp. 2-11).

From 1941 to 1953, Alavi was primarily engaged with publishing stories and articles, refining and honing his literary skills, and consolidating his reputation as a writer and an intellectual. In these years he also translated works of John B. Priestley (1894-1984), Anton Chekov (1860-1904), Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), and others (see below). In 1944 he was appointed editor of *Payām-enow* (The New Message), the official organ of the Perso-Soviet Society of Cultural Relations, in which he published the bulk of his literary output, all marked by ideological proclivities and political preferences (Ahmadi, pp. 262-3, 282; Kānlari, p.395). The account of his visit to the then Soviet Republic



of Uzbekistan as part of an Iranian cultural delegation was captured in *Ozbakhā* (The Uzbeks, 1948), in which he praised the Soviet Union for advancing the material and cultural well being of the Uzbeks. In 1953 he received the Gold Medal of the World Peace Council for the publication of *Nāmahā va dāstānhā-ye digar* (Kamshad, p. 113; Raffat, p. 9).

Alavi also played an instrumental role in organizing the First Iranian Writers Congress (1946), which provided a forum for airing various opposing views and produced a level of sophistication in its vigorous debates that remained unrivalled for many years. Unabashedly leftist in orientation, the Congress contributed significantly to the development of engagé literature, which attracted a large group of writers in later years (Ricks, pp. 8-25). It focused the attention of Persian writers on their collective rights and shared interests, a process that culminated in the establishment of the Writers' Association of Iran (Kānun-e nevisandegān-e Irān, 1968). The association is noteworthy for its lead in tackling problems of censorship in subsequent years (Yarshater, p. 313; Karimi-Hakkak, 1985, p. 89-229; Meskub, p. 558).

Alavi, unlike many Tudeh leaders, was more absorbed by the West-European, non-Soviet Marxism and dialectical materialism, advocated in Iran by Arāni and some of his followers. His flexible and tempered approach to social, political and literary issues (Kāma-i, p. 280), however, contrasted with the deterministic nature of the ideology he espoused. Split between the two poles, he penned ideologically framed articles while creating romantic stories that were frequently at odds with the confines of ideology.

Alavi's stories in this period are often denied the dominance of an omniscient narrator's voice, and thus allow for various characters to narrate the story from their own perspectives. Their accounts, not always in conformity with each other, cast a mysterious quality on the structure of the narrative, enthralling the reader, always kept in suspense, with the unfolding of the plot. This strategy is best employed in his most acclaimed novel *Čāšmhāyaš* (1952; tr. by John O'Kane as *Her Eyes*, 1989), generally considered a milestone in the development of modern Persian fiction. The story revolves around the portrait of an unknown woman, entitled "Her Eyes," painted by a famous artist, Mākān, a key figure of the underground opposition in the latter years of Režā Shah's reign (1925-1941), who has died in exile. Some critics hold that Alavi's portrayal of Mākān might have been based in part upon Kamāl al-Molk (d. 1938), renowned painter of the late Qajar and early Pahlavi era (Hillmann, p. 298; Mir'ābedini, I, p. 234), while some others have traced similarities between



Mākān and Arāni (Golširi, p. 507). *Her Eyes* is structured similarly to a framed painting, with a frame story within which the main story is narrated. The narrator of the frame story is the assistant principal of an art college, who tries to unravel the secrets that surround the life of Mākān, and the mystery that emanates from the eyes of the woman and strikes him most. He does not rest until he meets the owner of the eyes, Farangis, an educated woman of aristocratic background. When relating the story of her life and her relation with Mākān, Farangis talks about her passionate love for the Master, her involvement in underground political movements to please him, and her eventual acceptance of a long-standing proposal from the head of the Shah's police to save Mākān's life.

The publication of *Her Eyes* caused a great stir, and attracted both extravagant praise and equally strong condemnation (Kamshad, 1966, p. 120). Some critics found the ideological backdrop of the novel problematic and counterproductive, arguing that it has reduced the story to the level of a political pamphlet (Āl-e Aḥmad, 2005, p. 435). According to Kānlari, Alavi presented a first draft of the novel to Šādeq Hedāyat, Šādeq Čubak (1916-1998), and Kānlari, who found it a "sentimentally romantic story." Kānlari further stated that the novel suffered from the political overtones of subsequent revisions, conducted at the expense of its literary merits. He maintained that the clash between Alavi's literary romanticism and his political rigidity is the novel's point of weakness (Kānlari, p. 393). Alavi disagreed with Kānlari's assessment and attributed it to his pro-government politics and his cabinet position (Ahmadi, 2005, p. 48). Paradoxically, "the strongest attack came from the author's political comrades and the critics within his own party," in Iran and the Soviet Union (Kamshad, 1966, p. 121). To the apostles of the left, the eccentric Farangis represented an adventurous bourgeois girl, who had only joined the underground movement for excitement (Behādin, pp. 65-8).

Not all commentators, however, concurred with the harsh criticism of the Tudeh Party fans, and praised Alavi for his studied portrayal of Mākān and Farangis as complex and multidimensional characters, who had outgrown their socio-political confines (Vakili, 2005, p. 357). *Her Eyes* is also praised as a coherently depicted love story of psychological insight and oblique political protest, devoid of *clichés* and ideological platitudes (Yarshater, p. 34; Mir'ābedini, I, p. 234-5). The smooth infusion of romanticism, psychoanalysis, and ideology into simple, economical, and at the same time, poetical language, hitherto unfamiliar to Persian writers, may be considered among Alavi's



lasting contributions to thematic diversity in modern Persian literature (Yavari, p. 584). Alavi, unlike some of his contemporaries, in particular Šādeq Čubak, whose writings are marked by his constant attempt to reproduce regional dialects and transcribe the words as pronounced in spoken language, rarely deviates from the standard written language (Kānlari, p. 397; Bahārlu, 1996, pp. 108-9).

Alavi displays a remarkable talent for creating vivid female characters. His image of his first wife, Gitā, and his memories of his mother, who was separated from her husband and lived a lonely life, might have contributed to his depiction of Farangis (N. Alavi, p. 21). Like many of his other female protagonists, Farangis is neither sanctified nor reviled, and struggles against cultural traits that have informed her outlook. For all her flaws she engages the reader's sympathy. Farangis' emotions and dilemmas can perhaps be best understood as symptomatic of the rapid modernization Iran was undergoing in those years (O'Kane, p. 4-5). The confessional tone of her words brings her and the narrator, along with readers, to gradually understand that she has traveled far to save Mākān, and as the concluding lines of her life story tells us, "The Master has made a mistake."

Alavi was in the then East Berlin as a visiting professor at the Humboldt University, teaching Persian language and literature, when the government of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq fell (see [COUP D'ETAT OF 1332 Š./1953](#)). Facing imprisonment in Iran, he remained at Humboldt and turned his attention from fiction to scholarship and translation from Persian into German (Yarshater, p. 299; Ricks, p. 291), and more or less shunned political activity. He attended only one meeting of the Iranian Communist Tudeh Party in Moscow in 1957 (N. Alavi, p. 165). In 1969 he retired from Humboldt University.

In exile began the third phase of his literary career. His major works in German include *Kämpfendes Iran* (Iran in conflict, Berlin, 1955), and *Das Land der Rosen und der Nachtigallen* (The land of roses and nightingales, Berlin, 1957. With Heinrich F. J. Junker, he co-authored *Persisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1965a, and subsequent editions), a comprehensive Persian-German dictionary. He also authored *Geschichte und Entwicklung der modernen Persischen Literatur* (History and development of modern Persian literature, Germany, 1964), with some one hundred articles on Iranian poets and writers. The book follows the evolution of Persian prose and poetry since the beginning of the 20th century against the background of political and

social changes with sympathy, understanding and honesty (Lambton, p. 450). With Manfred Lorenz he authored *Lehrbuch der persischen Sprache* (The Persian grammar, Leipzig, 1967-73). The 8th edition of the book has appeared as *Langenscheidts Praktisches Lehrbuch Persisch* in 1999.

He edited and wrote epilogues to the German translation of three books by Sadeq Hedayat, and wrote articles on socio-political life in Iran (see below). He also contributed the entry on Taqī Arāni's political thoughts and activities to the *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (vol. 2, pp. 264-5), and wrote an introduction to *Kākestar-e hasti* (The ashes of life, Tehran, 1999), a collection of articles on literary criticism by Moḥammad Ja'far Maḥjub, noted Persian literary scholar. Some of his exilic short stories appeared in *Kaweh*, a Persian periodical published in Munich by Moḥammad Āṣemi. His long short story, *Mirzā* (1968, tr. by Judith Wilks as "Mirza," 1991), and the novel *Sālārihā* (The Salaris, 1978), were published in East Berlin.

In the spring of 1979 he returned briefly to Iran after 25 years in exile and was warmly received by the Iranian literati. He returned to Iran a year later in 1980 for another short visit and was dismayed by the repressive turn of the Revolution. He continued to live and work in Berlin, visiting Iran for the last time in 1993. His later works, such as *Muriāna* (Termites, Tehran, 1993), which tells the story of the last years of the Pahlavi regime from the perspective of an agent of the secret police, SAVAK, and *Ravāyat* (Story, Tehran, 1998), were critically weak and of little literary merit (Mir'ābedini, 1998, I, pp. 428-9; Hillmann, p. 299). Golširi considered them as moving from "revolutionary romanticism to Islamic romanticism" (Golširi, p. 522). The articles he wrote for *Āyanda* (Future), a Persian journal published and edited by Maḥmud Afšār (1893-1983, and later Iraj Afšār), and other publications did not contribute noticeably to his literary stature. His exilic short stories were published in Iran in two volumes, entitled *Mirzā* (1978) and *Yekka va tanhā* (Alone and lonely, 1978).

Alavi married his first wife, Gitā, in 1936. The marriage ended in divorce in 1939, while Alavi was still in prison. Later he married his cousin Fāṭema Alavi and had a son, Māni. In 1956, he married Gertrude Klapoetke in Germany. Fiction writing remained his lifelong ambition, but his path was fraught with obstacles and diversions and the course of his life was determined by social and political movements that cast him first into prison, propelled him into exile, and finally occasioned his unhappy trips to Iran. He died at 93, lamenting still his thwarted dream, "when I see my colleagues producing such



valuable works ... my heart is filled with sorrow that my hands are empty and ask myself what happened? 'You wanted to become a writer but got stuck on the way'" (Alavi, p.105).

However, although Alavi's literary works, unlike most of his contemporaries, number only a few, he will be remembered as an outstanding writer who has played a major role in the development of Persian modern fiction, and in familiarizing the German audience with contemporary Persian literature.

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Alavi’s exilic short stories were published in Iran in two volumes, entitled *Mirzā* (1978) and *Yekka va tanhā* (Alone and lonely, 1978). His autobiography, *Goḏāšt-e zamāna*, was posthumously published in 2006. (FIGURE 6)

Translations into Persian.

Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), as *Bāḡ-e ālbālu*, Tehran, 1950.

Samuil Marshak, *Twelve Months* (1943), as *Davāzdah māh*, 1950.

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