



BEHBAHANI, SIMIN III. PROSE

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iii. Prose

Although she is more noted for her poems, Behbahani has also written extensively in prose, and her first poetry collection, *Setār-e šekasta*, also included two of her short stories. Behbahani's stories are characterized by experimentations with time and space, and reflect an imaginative approach to the remembrance of bygone days. Her prose, with a predisposition toward poetical language, includes autobiographical narratives, short stories and notes on the life and works of her contemporaries, and notes and letters that reflect her views on various topics related to poetry, prosody, and literary criticism. Her writings on poetry, both critical and otherwise, provide the insights of a worker in the craft and have met with approbation in literary circles (Movaḥḥed, p. 66).

Her first collection of short stories, which also includes several memoirs, was published as *Bā qalb-e kod če karidam* (What did I buy by my heart; [Figure 1](#)), in Los Angeles, in 1996. It is arranged in four chapters as “Az ruz o ruzegāram” (On my life), “Naqli begu” (Tell a tale), “Naqši besāz” (Create a form), and “Afzudahā” (Additions). In the first chapter, which serves as the introduction to the book, Behbahani describes having to resort to prose when the delicate language of poetry does not appear to be the best means of expression, and like a traditional ‘naqqāl’ she often seasons her stories with verses. “The difference between Simin the storyteller and the traditional naqqāl, however,



is that while the traditional naqqāl's stories revolve around historical and mythological events and heroes, the heroes and events of this modern storyteller are ordinary people and their lives; and while the presence of the traditional naqqāl in the story he tells is in the role of a narrator who manipulates the story, the presence of Simin as the modern storyteller is felt directly." (Ghanoonparvar, 2008, pp. 37-38) "Fenjān-e šekasta," among the most noted stories in the collection, appeared in English translation by Kamran Talattof in 1997, as "The Broken Cup" (*Iranian Studies*, 30/3-4, Summer-Fall 1997, pp. 249-54).

In her memoir, *Ān mard, mard-e hamrāham* (That man, my fellow companion, Tehran, 1989), Behbahani delineates, in overly nostalgic tones, the devastating effect of the loss of her second husband. The first of two sections, "Sālār-e qeṣṣa-ye man" (The protagonist of my story), recounts how the two of them met, their life together, and his death. The second section, in eponymous title, consists of Behbahani's reminiscences, interspersed with poems in Nimaic metric schemes, describing her husband's influence on her life. Woven throughout the book is Behbahani's reconstruction, in symbolic language, of the process by which leftist discourse rose in the prerevolutionary period and fell after the revolution (Talattof, 2000, p. 162).

Behbahani's second autobiographical narrative, *Bā mādaram hamrāh: zendagi-nāma-ye koḏnevešt* (Along with my mother: an autobiography; Figure 2) was published in 2012 to high critical acclaim. In *Bā mādaram hamrāh*, unlike her ghazals that often follow a linear timeline, Behbahani treats the narrative time simultaneously as linear and circular. The employment of the technique allows her not only to shuttle back and forth between the past and present, between the real and the imagined, but also to juxtapose different socio-political discourses, and to challenge the existence of a single reality. *Bā mādaram hamrāh* enjoys an episodic structure and functions on two disparate yet intricately interwoven narrative layers (Korramšāhi, pp. 8-9). In the first layer, consisting of letters written to an imaginary friend, Behbahani's thinly masked alter ego, whom she addresses as "Ey mehrabān," delineates her mother's turbulent life as the narrative's protagonist ((Yarshater, 2013, pp. 156-58; Mirzā'i, pp. 3-7). The second layer, which appears in italics throughout the text, includes, in tandem with the first, passages that transpire internally, a sort of 'interior monologue,' that scrutinizes the credibility of the narrator's remembrance of bygone days. In his process of self-interrogation, past, present, and future walk in parallel; the boundaries between the 'real' and the



‘imagined’ are delimited; all the characters ultimately emerge as identical and pledge a dissoluble intercourse with culture, society and history (Milani, 2013, p. 170). A selection of Behbahani’s short stories and memoirs was published in *Kelid o kanjar: qeṣṣahā o ḡoṣṣahā* (The key and the sword: tales and sorrows) in 2000. Behbahani also translated Pierre de Boisdeffre’s *Les Poètes français dau’jourd’hui* into Persian under the title *Šā’erān-e emruz-e Farānseh* in 1994, and contributed the entry “[Fiction ii \(a\) The Historical Background of the Modern Persian Fiction](#)” to the *Encyclopedia Iranica* in 1999.

Behbahani produced a remarkable body of work and has been admired by an ever-growing number of readers inside and outside Iran for her poignancy, passion, and purpose. Over the course of several decades, she devoted her efforts toward the reinterpretation of a poetic form that, her rule-breaking departures notwithstanding, preserved the essence of the genre, to the point that her name is associated with the distinctive poetic style she created and popularized. Her polished diction, apt choice of words, and melodious expressions are all wedded to a broad humanitarian outlook that elevates her poetry above that of many of her contemporaries. Admiration for Behbahani has increased with time as has her stature as a poet and advocate of human rights and one of Iran’s pre-eminent modern literary figures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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