



BEHBAHANI, SIMIN I. LIFE

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i. Life

Siminbar Kālili (سمنبار کالیلی, known by the surname of her first husband, Ḥassan Behbahani, حسن بهبهانی) was born to ‘Abbās Kālili, (Figure 1) the novelist, translator, and founder of the newspaper *Eqdām*, and Faqr-e ‘Ozmā Arġun (1898-1966; Figure 2), a culturally engaged and progressive woman who founded *Nāma-ye Bānovān* (The Women’s journal) in 1939 (Parvin, p. 139). “She had a good command of French and was acquainted with English. She composed poetry, wrote stories, had an adequate knowledge of music, and was adept with the *tār*” (Behbahani, 1996, pp. 11-12; Idem, 1993, p. 170-71).

The marriage ended in divorce in 1930, and she was raised by her mother, who shortly thereafter married ‘Ādel Kāl’atbari, the journalist and founder of *Āyanda-ye Irān* (Parvin, p. 139). It was in their household that Behbahani encountered such prominent literary figures as Mohammad Hosayn Shahriar, Malek-al Šo’rā’ Bahār, and Sa’id Naficy, and was introduced to Persian poetry (Akbariāni, pp. 33-34).

She attended Nāmus Elementary School and Ḥasanāt High School in Tehran (‘Ābedi, p. 15), and enrolled in the School of Midwifery in 1945. Her membership in the youth branch of the Tudeh party (see [Communism](#)) resulted in allegations that she was responsible for newspaper articles critical of the school, and she was expelled.



Without any preliminaries, the College President Dr. Jahānšāh Šāleḥ directed a barrage of curses and insults at me. I answered back...He responded by immediately slapping me in the ears and face. Quickly I returned the slaps...I was seventeen years old and beaten by forces stronger than me... From that time the purpose of my poetry has been to fight injustice. (Behbahani, 1999b, p. xix-xx; Abu-Maḥbub, p. 31)

Several years after her expulsion, Behbahani resumed her education and enrolled in 1958 at Tehran University's Faculty of Law; she graduated four years later with a Bachelor's Degree in Judicial Law (Milani, 1993, p. 41). She was employed by the Ministry of Education as a high school teacher in 1951 and held the position for thirty years (Abu-Maḥbub, pp. 33-34, 37).

Behbahani started writing poetry at the age of twelve and was first published when she was fourteen, in the newspaper *Nowbahār* (Behbahani, 1996, p. 12), where Malek-al Šo'arā' Bahār served as editor-in-chief (Şadr-e Hāšemi, pp. 310-16). Her first poetry collection, *Setār-e šekasta* (The broken sitar, Tehran, 1950), consisted mostly of *čāhārpāra* (foursome), a quatrain, which lightly mitigates, but remains within, the classical requirements of meter and rhyme in Persian poetry. Although love, separation, and loneliness emerge as the dominant motifs in the majority of the poems, faint echoes of social concern are also discernible in portions of the collection. It was followed by the publication of *Jā-ye pā* (Footprints, Tehran, 1956), which included 76 poems, mostly *ghazal* or *čāhārpāra* and its variations. Neo-traditionalist in form, the poems either are love poems or hold social messages depicting injustices that at times beset ordinary people. "Her attention to intimate details of daily life protects her from making facile, sweeping generalizations" (Milani, 2011, p. 164).

Jā-ye pā serves as a turning point when one considers Behbahani's oeuvre. It is in this collection that her language comes of age, catches the attention of a number of the critics, and earns her a place of prominence among contemporary Iranian poets. In an article published in June 1956, while praising Behbahani's artistic discernment and her aptitude in composing *ghazals*, Iraj 'Aliābādi takes on what he argues to be of flawed logic in the collection, and criticizes her controversial approach to the relationship between art and society and the effects of art on societal change ('Aliābādi, pp. 31-38). The collection was reprinted in 1971 and earned Behbahani the admiration of [Kosrow Golsorki](#) for her skill in employing the potential of classical forms to render novel subject matters and complex social issues



(Golsorki, pp. 39-41).

During the interval between the publication of her first collections, Behbahani was associated for a period with the literary pages of *Tehrān-e Moṣavvar* and *Omid-e Irān* and also began working with Radio Iran as a lyricist in 1954. Over the course of her collaboration with Radio Iran, she composed several hundred songs, a number of which were set to music by the leading arrangers and performed by prominent musicians (Behbahani, 2004, pp. 589-90), and she joined Hushang Ebtehaj (Sayeh), [Nader Naderpour](#), and [Fereydun Moshiri](#) as a member of Radio Iran's Council of Poetry and Music (*Šowrā-ye še'r o musiqi; Boḳārā*, p. 20)

In her next collection of poetry, *Čelčērāḡ* (Candelabrum, Tehran, 1957), in which *čahārpāra* and *ghazal* appear in almost equal proportions, her command of poetic language was further heightened. Mostly love poems, some with erotic imagery, the collection also featured confessional poems, describing the poet's personal life and lamenting of longing and loneliness, as well as several poems on societal ills and predicaments. In 1962 Behbahani published *Marmar* (Marble, Tehran, 1962; [Figure 3](#)). A great number of the *ghazals*, which comprise the outright majority of this collection, support the contention that, after hesitations expressed earlier, she had ultimately opted for the *ghazal*, a very popular short lyric poem of some seven to fourteen lines with deep roots in Persian literature, defined "by a set of prosodical rules, certain thematic and stylistic conventions, and an equally conventional stock of imagery," (de Bruijn, p. 354) as her preferred means of expression.

After an eleven-year hiatus, Behbahani issued a new collection, *Rastākiz* (Resurrection, Tehran, 1973; [Figure 4](#)), which along with *Ḳaṭṭi ze sor'at o az ātaš* (A line of speed and of fire, Tehran, 1981) present, for the first time, the rather extensive product of Behbahani's exploration of metric schemes (see below). The meters employed in the majority of *ghazals* in *Ḳaṭṭi ze sor'at o az ātaš*, as she enumerates in the book, are either of her own invention, or renditions rarely encountered in the history of Persian poetry (Behbahani, 1981, pp. 147-50).

Tinged with the shades of social commitment since inception, following the 1979 revolution Behbahani's poetry took on unprecedented dimensions of social consciousness that continued to the end of her life. During this period she becomes one of the noted members of the Writer's Association of Iran (*Kānun-e nevisandegān-e Irān*, est. 1968), and for years she remained a staunch



supporter of civic movements and the peoples' desire for self-determination, advocating for the freedom of expression and challenging violations of human rights (Ganji, p. 121). Disenchanted after witnessing the violence perpetrated against those associated with the previous regime, she expresses her dismay with the revolutionary retributions and killings, and accuses those in power of oppression.

*Nemitavānam bebinam, jenāza'i bar zamin ast
ke bar koṭuṭ-e mahibaš, golulahā noḡta-čīn ast
ḡobāb-e mordāb-e češmaš, ze ḡofra birun jahida
tohi ze anduh o šādi, gosasta az mehr o kin ast*
(“Nemitavānam bebinam,” *Majmua'-ye aš'ār*, Tehran, 2003, pp. 595-96)

I can't look: a corpse lies on the ground
its horrifying outline punctuated by bullets
the swamp bubbles that were his eyes
expelled from their sockets
emptied of all joy and sadness
separated from all hatred and love
(Farzaneh Milani, *Words not Swords*, p. 169; for a textual and discursive analysis of the poem see, Talattof, 2008, pp. 19-36).

One of her most popular poems, dated Esfand 1360Š./March 1982, was composed during one of the bloodiest phases of the [Iran-Iraq War](#). The poem, titled “Dow-bāra misāzamat vaṭan” (text, [Figure 5](#)), which soon turned to a generational anthem, not only encapsulates a moment frozen in history, but a mood and a sentiment that generation after generation recognizes as authentic and true (Simidchieva, pp. 67-68). The poem is dedicated to “Bānu-ye qešsa-ye Fārsi: Simin Dānešvar” and appears also as the title of a collection of Behbahani's poems translated by Sara Khalili into English and published as *My Country, I Shall Build You Again* ([Figure 6](#); [Figure 7](#)).

*Dow-bāra misāzamat vaṭan / agar če bā kešt-e jān k'īš
Sotun be saqf-e tow mizanam, agar če bā ostok'ān-e k'īš
Dow-bāra mibuyam az tow gol/ be meyl-e nasl-e javān-e tow
Dow-bāra mišuyam az tow kun / be seyl-e ašk-e ravān-e k'īš*
(“Dow-bāra misāzamat vaṭan,” *Majmu'a-ye aš'ār*, Tehran, 2003, pp. 711-12)

My country, I shall build you again / even if with bricks of my life
I shall erect pillars beneath your roof, even if with my bones.



I shall again smell those flowers favored by your young,
 I shall again cleanse you of blood with the flood of my tears
 (Sara Khalili, *My Country, I Shall Build You Again*, pp. 172-74)

Behbahani's *Dašt e Aržan* (Arzhan Plain, Tehran, 1983) was followed by *Kāgādin jāma* (Paper dress, California, 1992; [Figure 8](#)), a collection which boasts an explicitly socio-political title by alluding to paper dresses worn by plaintiffs and complainants who used to line up along a road the king was expected to cross, counting on their unusual outfits to draw attention to their plight (*Farhang-e soḡan* VI, p. 5699). In addition to *Yek dariča āzādi* (A window to freedom), and *Yeki maṭalan in-ke ...* (For instance), which were published in Tehran in 1995 and 2000, respectively, selections of Behbahani's previously published poems also reappeared in several collections, including *Āšeqtar az hamiša beḡān: gozina-ye ḡazalhā-ye sonnati* (Sing more in love than ever: a selection of traditional ghazals, Tehran, 1995); and *Kowli o nāma o 'ešq: gozina-ye ḡazalhā-ye nowā'in* (Gypsy, letter, and love: a selection of modern ghazals, Tehran, 1995). The collected works of Simin Behbahani were published in Tehran in 2003 (see below).

From an early age and over the entire course of her life, Behbahani participated in and was a member of numerous poetic associations and societies (Behbahani, 2014, pp. 56-60, 89) and used her prominence to advance and promote human rights and the freedom of expression. Her closest literary friendships were with Nader Naderpour, Fereidun Moshiri, Simin Daneshvar, [Mehdi Akhavan-e Saless](#) and [Hamid Mossadeq](#). Her relations with her contemporary female poet, [Forugh Farrokhzad](#), were flavored by a mutual sense of competition (Akbariāni, pp. 69-71; Behbahani, 1993, pp. 185-87).

Behbahani delivered lectures and recited her poems at many universities, seminars, and conferences all over the world. In celebration of her life and poetry, international symposiums were held in 2006 at the University of Toronto, University of California, Berkeley, and New York City's Asia Society ([Figure 9](#)). A collection of nine DVDs on her life and poetry was released in 2006, including live recordings of interviews and poetry readings by her and prominent scholars of Persian literature ([Figure 10](#)), as well as a documentary, entitled "Simin: Nimā-ye ḡazal," directed by Āraš Sanjabi.

Behbahani received numerous national and international awards and prizes, both for her poetry and for her promotion of human rights. She was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1999 and 2002; was awarded



the Human Rights Watch Hellman-Hammet grant, as the “voice of freedom rising against repression everywhere,” in 1998; and the Carl von Ossietzky Medal by the International League for Human Rights in 1999 for “her struggle for freedom of expression in Iran.” She was honored in 2002 by the Encyclopaedia Iranica Foundation for the unparalleled beauty of her poetry and her lifelong devotion to freedom and social justice; received the Freedom of Expression Award from the Writers Union of Norway in 2007; the Latifeh Yarshater Award in 2008 for her lifelong dedication to the improvement of Iranian women’s human rights (Figure 11); and the Bitā Daryabari Prize for Literature and Freedom from Stanford University in 2008. She was also the recipient, in 2014, of the International Society for Iranian Studies’ Lifetime Achievement Award for a Scholar Residing and Working in Iran.

In March 1947 she married Ḥassan Behbahani, an English teacher. The marriage ended in divorce in 1969. Her progeny from that 22-year union were two sons and a daughter: ‘Ali (b. 1947), Ḥosayn (b. 1949), and Omid (b. 1954). In 1970 she married Manučehr Kušyār, whom she lost to a heart ailment in 1984. Behbahani recounts the devastating effect of the loss in, *Ān mard, mard-e hamrāham* (That man, my fellow companion, Tehran, 1989; see ii. Poetry). Simin Behbahani passed away on 19 August 2014 in Tehran from cardiac and respiratory complications. Her body was buried in Behešt-e Zahrā. Thousands attended the funeral ceremony, including prominent intellectuals, artists, and human rights activists (Figure 12). Her death received wide coverage outside Iran, and several commemorative celebrations were held in different countries, including a special session of the Iranian Studies Seminar of Columbia University in New York on Friday, September 19, 2014.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

see iv. Selected .