



ESFAHANI, JALEH

ESFAHANI, Jaleh (Žāla Ešfahāni, b. Esfahan, 1921; d. London, 29 November 2007), female poet and political activist ([FIGURE 1](#)).

Esfahani (registered as Etal) was born into a land-owning family. She went through primary and secondary education in Behešt Ā'yin School in Esfahan, at the time run by the British missionaries, and completed her secondary education at Nurbakš High School in Tehran. In her autobiographical account, *Sāya-yesālhā* (The shadow of the years, Germany 1987), she talks of her father's disapproval of her going to school, and the instrumental role played by her mother in her education (*Sāya-yesālhā*, p. 39).

In 1946, Esfahani married Šams-al-Din Badi' Tabrizi, a member of the military wing of Iran's communist party (Ḥezb-e Tuda; see [COMMUNISM](#)), who was also involved with the Democratic Party of Azarbaijan (ferqe-ye demokrāt-e Ādarbāyejān), the dominant political party in Azarbaijan during the Pišavari period. Following the inglorious end of the Azarbaijan Republic after a year, Esfahani and her husband left Iran and settled in Baku in the then Soviet Azarbaijan. They had two sons, Bižan (Baku, 1949) and Mehrdād (Baku, 1954).

Esfahani began to compose poems when she was only seven. Her poems were published in newspapers such as *Aktar*, *Sepantā* and *Bāktar*, while she was still in high school. Her first collection of poetry, *Golhā-ye k'odru* (Wild flowers) was published in Tehran in 1945. Esfahani's early poetry is romantic and lyrical in imagery and tone:



*Marā ey abr-e sargardān, be ru-ye bāl-e kʻod benšān
bedeh yek laḥza parvāzam borun zin gonbad-e gardān;
boro jāʻi ke jān-e man šavad fāreḡ ze dard o ḡam
nabinad dida-am čizi be-ḡayr-az čehra-ye jānān.*

(O, wandering cloud! Place me on your wing give me a flight for a moment and take me out of this revolving dome; Take me to a place where my soul would be free from pain and sorrow where my eyes would see nothing but the face of my beloved; *Golhā-ye kʻodru*, p. 5)

Esfahani was the youngest among a number of poets who participated in the First Iranian Writers Congress, a gathering with leftist sympathies, organized by the Perso-Soviet Society of Cultural Relations (Anjoman-e ravābeṭ-e farhangi-e Iran va Etteḥād-e Jamāhir-e Šowravi) in 1946. The Congress, attended by many noted literary figures and presided by [Moḡammad-Taḡi Bahār](#) (Malek-al-šoʻarāʻ, 1886-1951), the prominent poet and scholar, provided a forum for airing various opposing views and contributed significantly to the development of engagé literature in Iran, which attracted a large group of writers in later years (Ricks, pp. 8-25).

In 1947 Esfahani left for the Soviet Union, where she studied Russian, Azeri Turkish and Persian literature at the University of Baku and translated Azeri Turkish poems into Persian. She completed her graduate studies in literature at Lamasov University in Moscow and wrote her thesis on the life and work of Malek-al-šoʻarāʻ Bahār.

From 1960 to 1980, Esfahani cooperated as a literary scholar with the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute, founded in 1933 on the initiative of Maxim Gorky (1868-1936) in Moscow. She taught Persian language and literature, and conducted research projects on various aspects of modern Persian poetry, most significant among them a study of the evolution of modern poetic discourse in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. During her stay in the Soviet Union, Esfahani was known as the sole female face of Persian poetry, and often traveled to Tajikistan and Afghanistan and other neighboring countries. She attended many congresses and conferences and presented talks and papers to promote the importance of literary cooperation among the Persian-speaking peoples (*Times*).

Zenda Rud, her first exilic collection of poetry was published in Moscow in 1965. The collection, being banned in Iran after a brief circulation, was

reprinted in Tehran in 1981, after the advent of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. *Kešti-e kabud* (The blue ship, 1978) and *Naqš-e Jahān* (1980) were published in Tajikistan and Moscow, respectively. In these exilic works, “natural objects appear as harbingers of good news from home, trains as recalling movements that ended in separation and asking dead poets if they, too, had experienced being severed from their beloved home towns.” (Karimi Hakkak). In Tajikistan, she also published poems in Russian and Azeri Turkish, as well as seven Persian collections in Cyrillic alphabet. She also authored a number of dramatic works, of which one was performed in operatic form in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in 1959 and 1960 (Farroḳzād, p.97).

Throughout these years her poetry moved further and further away from lyricism and was increasingly stamped by the blunt advocacy of political ideologies, a trait by which her poetry will probably be best remembered. She addressed the members of the military wing of the Tudeh Party who had been arrested after their network had been betrayed in 1957, in one of her poems:

*Afsarān! tangdel az šoḥbat-e zendān našavid
zinhār az ‘amal-e nik pašimān našavid;
dām hargez nazanad laṭma be šakšiyat-e šir
šir-mardid šomā, kasta ze zendān našavid
bāyad āzād šavad mamlekat az jahd-e šomā
bahr-e ‘ezz o šaraf az marg harāsān našavid*

(O, officers! Don’t be overcome with sorrow in jail Beware! Never regret a good deed!; A snare never tarnishes the august spirit of a lion you are lion-hearted men, don’t let jail wear you down..... The country must be liberated by your struggle for the sake of honor, don’t fear death; *Sāya-yesālhā*, p. 151)

After 30 years in exile she returned briefly to Iran with the advent of the Islamic Revolution, and was warmly received by the Iranian literati. Her *Agar hezār qalam dāštam* (If I had one thousand pens), with an introduction by Eḥsān Ṭabari, was published in Tehran in 1980. However, after only two years of stay in Iran, she departed for London, where she stayed to the end of her life. In London she published several poetry collections (see below) and also an autobiography, entitled *Sāya-ye sālhā*, which was published both in Germany and in Iran in 1987. In the first chapter of the book, “Zādghāh” (Birthplace), she goes into minute details in describing her surroundings, and the people around her during her childhood and adolescence. The second chapter is devoted to her life in the Soviet Union as a literary figure, while in



the third chapter, “bāzgašt” (Return), she provides a detailed account of the two years she spent in Iran after the revolution, her trips to Shiraz and Māzandarān, and her experience in dealing with compulsory veiling. She addresses the post-revolutionary Persian women in a poem, entitled “*zan-e Irani*”:

*Mabād ey zan-e Irāni, ey zan-e bidār
ke sarnevešt-e tow dar dast-e digarān bāšad;
be qarn-e fath-e fažā
ke zan be-jā-ye ferešta be āsmān raftast
čerā vojūd-e to dar čādori nahān bāšad?*

(May the day not arrive, O, Iranian woman when your destiny is decided by others; In the era of the conquest of space when women, instead of angels, have soared to skies why should you be shrouded in a chador; *Alborz-e bi-šekast* p. 49)

Esfahani’s poetry is ensconced in the tradition of Persian prosody (see ‘ARUZ). In fact, a few exceptions apart, she never abandons variations on the metrical traditions of classical Persian poetry. She frequently borrows imageries from poets of the classical period, and adapts them to the requirements of her politically laden poems. In a poem entitled “Shiraz,” in *Ey bād-e šorṭa*, she draws upon *Hafez*, employing such imageries as *možda-ye vašl*, and “*ṭāyer-e qods* (*Ey bād-e šorṭa*, p.35). Since the beginning of her literary career coincided with a period of radical change in Persian poetry, however, Esfahani joined many of her contemporaries in following, in various degrees, the new trends set by Nimā Yušij (1907-1959), who founded modern Persian poetics in Iran. As one critic has contended, the influence of Nimā on Esfahani’s poems is limited to the breaking of lines and changing of rhymes (Ābedi, pp.41-42). In a poem entitled “*Tow šāe’ri*,” she praises Nimā as ‘*peyğambar-e omidhā o ranjhā*’, ‘*vāreṭ-e kazzā’en-e goḏašta*’, and ‘*setiğ-e sarkešida su-ye āsmān*’ (*Agar hezār qalam dāštam*, p. 217). One her poems in the collection *Agar hezār qalam dāštam*, is a hopeful retelling of Nima’s gloom-ridden poem “*Qāyeqam be gel nešasta*”...(My boat is grounded...).

*Gar qāyeqam nešasta be koški
faryād mizanam
tā por šavad ze na’ra-ye man guš-e āsmān.....
tā saylhā korusad o ṭufān konad be pā
tā kašm-e mowjhā*



ān qāyeq-e nešasta be koški rā
bar saḥ-e por-talāṭom-e daryā konad ravān

(If my boat is grounded I will shout until the sky's ears are filled with my roar... until floods flow and storms begin until the anger of waves float my grounded boat onto the enraged waves of the sea; *Agar hezār qalam dāštam*, p. 181)

Esfahani left Iran in the heyday of Marxism-inspired cosmopolitanism. Enthralled by the idea of a just and classless utopia founded on Marxist doctrines, her exilic corpus speaks the language of hope and optimism. Influenced by the grammar of exile in the 1940s and inspired by a sense of political mission, her poetry stands in contrast with the works of many exiled poets of the next generation who were forced out of Iran in 1979, and whose futile struggles failed to give substance to their vision of a better future and whose works bear the imprint of betrayed ideals, and a deep sense of loss (Kiānuš, p.81).

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Kašti-e Kabud (Blue ship), Tajikistan, 1978.

Koruš-e kāmūši (Roaring silence), Stockholm, 1993.

Majmu'a-ye Naqš-e Jahān (Naqš-e Jahān Collection), Moscow, 1980.

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Migrating Birds, the English translation of a selection of her poems, was published in London in 2006. Many of her poems are translated into Czech, Arabic and Kurdish languages. Her autobiography, *Sāya-ye sālḥā* (The shadow of years), was published in Germany and Iran in 1987.

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(Shadab Vajdi)

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