



## ḤĀTAMI, 'ALI

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**ḤĀTAMI, 'ALI**, eminent Iranian scriptwriter and film director (b. Tehran, 1944; d. Tehran, 1996; [Figure 1](#)). Born to a typesetter father and a homemaker mother, Ḥātami received an early exposure to music and film thanks to the patronage of his uncles. After attending scriptwriting workshops during his high school years, he enrolled in the Dramatic Arts Department of Tehran University and graduated in 1964 with a B.A. in Directing (Omid, p. 143; Sayyed Moḥammadi, p. 233). Ḥātami started his professional career by writing stage plays based on Persian fables and copywriting for advertising agencies. In 1966, he was hired as a scriptwriter by Iranian National Television and wrote a script for a short film, *Ḥemāsa-ye ešqi-e šab-e jom'a*. He then co-authored and co-directed (with Jawād Ṭāheri) a pilot for a TV series for children, in which he also played the key role of a masked rabbit, though that series in the end was never produced (Ḥā-tami, 1997, p. 42).

Ḥātami holds a unique place among the masters of Persian cinema as a skilled raconteur of life and love in bygone eras. His twelve feature films and three television series are testimony to the passion and keen perception with which he created a romanticized vision of fading times, unmistakably tinged with soulful nostalgia. Unlike most Iranian filmmakers, he did not share a fascination for film as an independent medium. He once said he did not want to acquire something from cinema and feed it back to cinema (Ḥaydari, 1996, p. 48). Instead, he attempted to fill a Western medium with a distinctly Persian brand of lore and language. Nor was he moved by the immediate social realities. His films, intricately woven reconstructions of Iranian cultural



identity, shed light on the turn-of-the-century ethos behind Iran's unpaved road to modernization.

Ḥātami often relied on stationary shots and shied away from moving his camera. The stillness, for which he was criticized by advocates of pure cinema, coupled with his meticulously detailed compositions, at times transformed his frames into exquisite paintings. He called himself “a carpet weaver” (Ruḥāni, 1991, p. 68). The analogy, while aptly describing his dazzling tapestries, always embellished with a language best defined as vernacular poetry, also underlined Ḥātami's deep commitment to Persian artistic traditions.

For all his interest in dealing with the characters and incidents shaping the political and social history of the Qajar and Pahlavi periods, Ḥātami's films are not particularly concerned with faithful representation and historical accuracy. He preferred a more creative interpretation of history, an approach which made him the target of attacks that undermined a true appreciation of his artistic vision. His response to the critics was to remind them of his aim to explore historical truth rather than the facts of history. Ḥātami's portrayal of the events of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11 and its key participants in *Sattār Kān* brought him furious accusations that he had distorted the facts. Ḥātami defended himself by asserting that he was not an historian, but rather his main interest in making the film was to explore the human dimensions of the characters (Ḥaydari, 1996, pp. 78, 140, 177).

In 1970, Ḥātami adapted two Persian fairy tales, “Ḥasan kačal” and “Čehel Gis,” into a script about an enchanted love for his musical *Ḥasan kačal*. This was a ground-breaking departure from the popular but banal Iranian musicals of the time, which were mostly influenced by Indian, Arabic, and American examples of the genre. With *Ḥasan kačal* and his third film *Bābā šamal*, Ḥātami sought to create an integrated musical form in which he utilized metrical language in place of dialogue to tell his stories, rather than simply adding musical numbers to a conventional narrative. This was in fact an authentic musical genre deeply steeped in Persian cultural codes and rituals, reminiscent of the traditional theatrical forms of staged entertainment in Persia—from *ta'zia* (passion-plays; see ḤOSAYN iii.) to *ruḥawzi* (popular live musical performance).

*Ḥasan kačal*, the story of a poor boy captivated by a beautiful girl under the spell of a beast, also established a theme that Ḥātami re-visited numerous times: unattainable love. Almost all major characters in his films made prior to



the formation of the Islamic Republic are consumed by love, but their lives are governed by the restrictive codes of a moral universe from which they can not seem to escape. His second film, *Ṭawqī*, was the story of a man infatuated with a young woman his uncle plans to marry. *Bābā šamal* was another romantic triangle about two men in love with the same woman. In *Qalandar*, the title character secretly loved his sister (the censors changed the sister to a god-sister). *Kvāstegār*, a dark comedy, was about a persistent, strait-laced suitor whose elusive object of affection kept marrying other men and would only accept the loyal lover's proposal on her deathbed. *Suta-delān* followed a disfigured, mentally retarded young man who unknowingly falls for a prostitute.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the radical puritanical changes it imposed on Iranian cinema made Ḥātami's favorite theme of unattainable, or forbidden, love a banned subject. He then turned his attention to an ambitious project for a television series he had conceived prior to the revolution, which he had then called *The Silk Road*. Under the new title of *Hezār dastān*, this epic tale of political intrigue inspired by events in Persia during the thirties and forties, took eight years to complete. To build the proper setting for this demanding project, Ḥātami painstakingly led a group of architects and craftsmen in the construction of a cinematic city to represent Old Tehran. The phantom city remains one of his indelible legacies and is often used to shoot period films (Ḥātami, 1997, pp. 104-11).

During the inevitable delays and intervals in the production of this mammoth series, Ḥātami made several feature films: *Ḥāji Vāšangton* (q.v.), about the travails of the first Iranian ambassador to Washington, Ḥājj Ḥo-saynqoli Ṣadr-al-Salṭana; *Kemāl-al-Molk*, an account of the life and art of the renowned painter of the Qajar era; and *Ja'far Kān az farang bar-gašta*, shot in 1984 and shown in 1989. Based on a play by Ḥasan Moqaddam, this was a satirical examination of the clash between modernity and tradition in Iran that Ḥātami produced as the first comedy in the Islamic Republic. A bitter clash of personalities between Ḥātami and his producer, 'Alī 'Abbāsi, led to the hiring of another director, Moḥammad Motawaṣṣelāni, who altered the ill-fated *Ja'far Kān* significantly despite Ḥātami's objection (Ḥaydari, pp. 128-32).

Ḥātami's last two films are considered among his best: *Mādar* (1990) depicted an uneasy family reunion at the request of a dying matriarch, while *Del-šodagān* (1992) followed the sad journey of a group of Qajar-era musicians to Paris to record their music. Death was one of the prominent themes of both



films, and a few years later Ḥātami himself died of cancer, while shooting a film about the Persian wrestling champion Ġolām-Rezā Taḵti. His funeral, which brought out an impressive crowd of colleagues and fans, turned into an unprecedented public homage to an artist in Iran. His wife Zari (Zahrā) Ḳoškām, was a prolific movie star before the revolution, and their daughter Laylā, who appeared as a child actor in her father's films and television series, has become a leading actress in Iran.

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