



KASRA'I, SIAVASH

KASRA'I, SIAVASH (Siāvaš Kasrā'i, b. Isfahan, 1926; d. Vienna, 8 February 1996; [Figure 1](#)), noted Marxist poet and political activist of the 20th century who, in different stages of his literary career, assumed several pseudonyms: *Kowli*, *Rašid Qalqi*, *Farhād-e Rahāvar* and *Šabān-e bozorg-e omid*.

Shortly after his birth, Kasra'i's parents moved from Isfahan to Tehran, where he received his primary education at Adab School and his secondary school education at the Military College (*Madrasa-ye neẓām*) and [DĀR AL-FONŪN](#). After graduating from the Faculty of Law of the University of Tehran (1947-1950), he worked at the Northern Branch of the Institute of Cooperation in Hygiene (*Sāzmān-e hamkāri-e behdāšti*, affiliated to the Point Four Program), and Bank of Housing (*Bānk-e sāḵtemāni*). During the 1970s he worked for Behshahr Industrial Group (*Goruh-e ṣan'ati-e Behšahr*) in Tehran, and at the same time, taught Persian literature at the University of Sistān and [Baluchistan](#) in Zāhedān, and at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Tehran University. He married Mehri Nawḍari in 1962 and had two children: a daughter, Bibi (1965) and a son, Māneli (1968).

While still in high school, Kasra'i made friends with such political figures as Moḥsen Pezeškpur and Dāriuš Foruhar, and was influenced by their nationalistic sentiments. As a college student, however, he became enthralled by the ideals of a just and classless society based on Marxist doctrines, and became a loyal member of the Tudeh Party. In the 1940s, along with some other young and avant-garde poets with a sense of political mission, including Aḥmad Šāmlu (1925-2000), Hušang Ebtehāj, and [Mehdi Akhavan-e Saless](#),



Kasra'i joined the circle of Nimā Yušij (1907-1959), who is generally acknowledged as the founder of modern Persian poetical discourse. Following the line set by Nimā and attempting a freer and more independent mode of expression, Kasra'i was a central figure in familiarizing the growing Persian audiences with Nimā's poetry. His early poetry, although implicitly burdened by his ideological views, is nevertheless romantic and lyrical in imagery and tone.

At the age of 27, following the fall of the government of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq in 1953 and the suppression of the Tudeh Party, Kasra'i was arrested and imprisoned for a short time (Author's correspondence with Mehri Nawḍari; 'Ābedi, p. 18). Throughout the second half of the same decade, he was increasingly involved in political activities and, in turn, appropriated the ambiguous and metaphoric language of the period's politicized poetry, developed from the committed poets' need to escape censorship (Yarshater, 1984, p. 49; Meskub, p. 163). Under different pseudonyms, he wrote poems in praise of such Marxist figures as [Taḳī Arāni](#) (1902-1940), and [Kosrow Golesorki](#) (1943-1973; see Kasra'i, 1976, pp.19-20). He dedicated his most famous collection of poetry, *Āraš-e kamāngir* (Arash the Archer, 1959; See [ĀRAŠ ii](#)), to the memory of Kosrow Ruzbeh (1927-1958), an influential member of the military branch of the Tudeh Party, who was executed in 1958. He also wrote poems praising such international figures as Patrice Lomumba of Congo, Ernesto Che Guevara of Latin America, and Robert Sands of Ireland (Kasra'i, 1962, pp. 86-9; 1967, pp. 56-8). One of his collections of poetry, *Besorḳi-e ātaš, be ta'm-e dud* (Red as a fire, tasting of smoke, 1976), was first published in Sweden with the help of the exiled members of the Tudeh Party, under the pseudonym of *Šabān-ebozorg-e omid* (The Great Shepherd of Hope). One of his most noted short poems was dedicated to the memory of his friend, Morteżā Keyvān, who was sentenced to death for collaborating with the military branch of Tudeh Party: “*Ey 'aṭr-e riḳta /'aṭr-e goriḳta /del 'aṭr-dān-e ḳāli o por entezār-e tost /ḡam yādgār-e tost.*” (O spilled perfume / evaporated perfume / my heart is an empty scent bottle / filled with the desire of you / sorrow is your keepsake; Kasra'i, 1962, p. 25)

Nature still occupies an important place in this phase of Kasra'i's poems (Zarrinkub, p. 147-8, 'Ābedi, p. 23). Some of his most noted poems were published during these years: “*To qāmat-e boland-e tamannā'i ey deraḳt / hamvāra ḳofta ast dar āḡušat āsemān / bālā-i ey deraḳt / dastat por az setāra o jānat por az bahār / zibā-i ey deraḳt*” (You are the towering figure of desire o



tree / ever the sky rests in your arms / you are great o tree / your hands full of stars and your soul full of spring / you are beautiful o tree) (Kasra'i, 1966 b, pp.14-5) “*Šab hā ke to ‘āšeqāna miḵvāni / šab hā ke to bi bahāna migeryi / šab hā ke setārahā foru koftast / golhā-ye sepid-e bāg bidārand / jān tešna-ye šobh-e rowšani pardāz* (Nights when amorously you sing / nights when with no excuse you cry / nights when even the stars have slept / the white flowers of the garden are awake / thirsting for the light burnishing morning; Kasra'i, 1962, p. 70).

Throughout the second half of the 1960s the poetry of Kasra'i moved further and further away from lyricism. Unlike the political symbolism of his earlier poems, which concealed, to some extent, the messages advocated by the poet, his poetry from this time onwards was increasingly stamped by the blunt advocacy of political ideologies, a trait by which his poetry will probably be best remembered (Meskub, pp. 180; Šafi'i Kadkani, 1980, p. 127). He portrays the United States in one of his poems as the “*bāšgāh-e forumāyegān o forudgāh-e kašm-e jāhāniān*” (the club for the mean spirited and the airport where universal wrath will land” (Kasra'i, 1979, p. 52-4). The direct language of his poetry was highly prized by some Marxist-Leninist commentators. He was awarded the title of the “poet of the people” by a prominent leader of the Tudeh Party, who praised him for holding to his “stronghold of ideological views,” (Ṭabari, intr. *America, America*, p. 6).

During this phase of his life, Kasra'i also published critical essays on the social and political aspects of the poetry of Nimā Yušij. In an essay entitled *Parvāz dar havā-ye morḡ-e āmin* (A Flight in the Sphere of the Amen Bird, 1965), Kasra'i offers a Marxist interpretation of one of Nimā's most noted poems, *Morḡ-e āmin* (The Amen Bird, 1952). *Morḡ-e āmin* features a dialogue in the rain between a bird and the people (kalq), whose joined voices signify a collective desire for freedom and justice. Kasra'i places the bird in the context of other mythical birds known in Persian literature, and describes it as a tragic soul in search of social justice (Karimi Hakkak, 1995, pp. 233-87).

Although Kasra'i had received substantial recognition in the literary circles by then, it was not until the publication of his most famous collection, *Āraš-e kamāngir* (Arash the Archer, 1959), that he came to high critical notice (Āšuri, p. 163; Behādin; vol. 1, pp. 72-78; Parhām, p. 460). To settle a border dispute between Iran and its perennial enemy Turān, Āraš, a heroic figure of Persian legend, whose tale is recounted in the Avesta, and in more details in the Islamic sources, shoots the arrow to the furthest point of the land, and,



according to most sources, immediately collapses as he has put all his strengths in shooting. The arrow flies the entire day and at the following noon lands in the trunk of a walnut tree on the far bank of the Oxus River in what is now Central Asia (Yarshater, 1957, p. 11-12; Tafazzoli, pp. 77-9). The theme of the tale struck a sensitive chord in some of the writers and poets in 1960s, becoming the subject of several works (Hanaway, p. 267).

Kasra'i's retelling of the myth, however, enjoyed the warmest response from the readers and critics alike. Commenting on the theme, structure, and heroic language of the poem, Kānlari praised it as a pioneering work in the genre of modern Persian epic, which unlike many gloom-ridden literary works written in the 1950s celebrates hope, honor, and national pride. (Kānlari, pp. 563-4). As contended by Šafi'i Kadkani, the poem, in which extraordinary events are interwoven into the narrative of national pride and glory, is steeped in the old tradition of the Persian epic and signals its modern revival (Šafi'i Kadkani, 1973, p. 16). However, not all commentators found the language of the poem 'appropriately heroic' (Akavān Tālet, pp. 293-94, 371-72), and some criticized it for failing to conjure up the language of Ferdowsi's *Šāh-nāma* (Zarrinkub, pp. 137-38). The theme of the tale struck a sensitive chord in some of the writers and poets in 1960s, becoming the subject of several works (Hanaway, p. 267).

In spite of such reservations, the poem captured the period's literary imagination: "*Āri, āri jān-e k'vod dar tir kard Āraš / kār-e šad hā šad hazārān tiġa-ye šamšir kard Āraš*" (Yes, yes, to the arrow he gave his life, Arash / Arash achieved the toil of thousand swords; Kasra'i, 1959, p.35). The poem was the theme of a modern ballet, choreographed by Šāhroḡ Moškin-ḡalam and featured in Tirgān Art Festival (Toronto, 2008).

Kasra'i was among the founding members of the Writers' Association of Iran (Kānun-e nevisandegān-e Irān, 1968), and was elected with Simin Dānešvar, Behazin, Nader Naderpour, and Dāriuš Āšuri to its first executive board (Ābedi, p. 22; Karimi Hakkak, 1985, p. 195). He was among the group of poets, writers and intellectuals who participated in the German Cultural Institute's nights of lectures and poetry readings, held between 10 and 19 October 1977 (see [GOETHE INSTITUTE](#)). He read his poems on the sixth night of the event. The speeches and poems were later edited by Nāšer Mo'adden and published as a book entitled *Dah Šab* (The Ten Nights) in 1978. Some of Kasra'i's many political poems, written in this period served as revolutionary anthems in the very first years of the revolution. However, as contended by some critics the forthright political contents of the poems had an adverse effect on their



literary qualities (Meskub, p. 175-8; Falaki, p. 258; Behādin; vol. 1, p. 80).

In November 1979, Kasra'i and other members of the Tudeh Party objected to the decision of the executive board of the Writers' Association to organize nights of poetry reading, arguing that the country's situation did not warrant such an undertaking. The executive board of the Association suspended the membership of Karas'i, Behādin, Hušang Ebteḥāj, Feraydun Tonekāboni, and Moḥammad Taqī Borumand. Their membership, however, was reinstated in November 2000 (Karimi Hakkak, p. 218-21; Moḳtāri, pp. 9-12; Taqāfi, p. 11).

Soon after the revolution and the subsequent suppression of the Tudeh Party in 1982, Kasra'i fled to Afghanistan. In 1985 he moved to Moscow where he was appointed to the central committee of the Tudeh Party. He resigned from this position in 1995 and joined his family in Vienna, where he published his second epic *Mohra-ye sork*, (The red stone, 1995), a recounting of the story of Rostam and Sohrāb of the *Šāh-nāma* of Ferdowsi. Exile and the betrayed hopes had taken their toll. Unlike the optimistic tone of his earlier epic, which in his own words was “the fruit of his youth”, the Red Stone, as the “harvest of his old age,” is characterized by sorrow and disappointment, and bespeaks of a self, entangled in harsh criticism. In his introduction to *Mohra-ye sork*, he talks of those political activists who, with little knowledge and understanding, were bedazzled by ideologies, and how their misguided and futile struggles failed to give substance to their vision of a better future, leading instead to death and despair (Kasra'i, 1995, pp. 5-7). The *Red stone*, also choreographed by Šāhroḳ Moškin-qalam as a modern ballet, was featured in Los Angeles in 2011 and attracted a huge crowd.

The indelible prints of betrayed hopes, and a deep sense of loss mark Kasra'i's exilic poetry. Most of his exilic poems witness to the fact that he had difficulty in adjusting to life away from his native land. In one poem, addressed to Iran, he writes: “*Kinjā ḡarib mānda parākanda kāṭerist / delbasta-ye šomā o be ommid-e hič kas*” (Here there is one alienated and distraught devoted to you and awaiting no one) (Kasra'i, 2002, pp. 65-67) Kasra'i has also experimented, although without much success, with the genres of *ḡazal* (lyrics), and *maṭnnavi* (rhymed couplets). His poems in *robā'i*, *dow bayti* (quatrains), and the modern genre of *čahār-pāra* have enjoyed critical acclaim. An example is the following: “*Kenār-e češma-i budim dar kṽāb / to bā jāmi robudi māh az āb / čo nušidim az ān jām-e govārā / to nilufar šodi man ašk-e mahtāb*” (We were asleep by the side of a brook You stole the moon from the water with a cup When we drank from that refreshing cup You turned into a water lily, and I



into tears shed by the moonlight) (Kasra'i, 1966 a, p. 11) In fact, with the exception of few poems like *Az qoroq tā koruskvān* (From Curfew to Cock Crow, 1978), Kasra'i never abandoned the variations on the metrical traditions of classical Persian poetry. As a stylistically moderate follower of Nimā (Nuri'alā, p. 193), with a more refined language (Yusofi, p. 489), and a poet whose poetry is better known than himself (Nāderpur, p. 9) Kasra'i is among the Persian poets with modernist tendencies who "have introduced sufficient novelty into their poetry to set it apart from the poetry of the past, and yet have preserved enough affinity with tradition to save their works from sounding alien or incomprehensible" (Yarshater, 1978, p. 48).

Ksara'i is also the author of several stories for children, of which *Ba'd az zemestān dar ābādi-e mā* (After the Winter in Our Village, 1947), was voted by *Šawrā-ye ketāb-e kudak* (The Council for Children's Book) as the best book of the year for children. The English translation of the story, illustrated by Hušang Malekniā, is published in *Children Everywhere* (Chicago, 1970). Ksara'i's essays, short stories and interviews are published in a collection entitled *Dar havā-ye morġ-e āmin* (In the sphere of the Amen Bird, Tehran, 2002). Some of his poems are translated into French (Amirchahi, pp. 127-8; Battesti, pp. 118-20), and Russian (Navvābi, pp. 279-81). The bilingual collection of his selected poems, translated into English by Sara Khalili and edited by Michael Beard, was published as *Be sorġi-e ātaš be ta'm-e dud* (*As Red as Fire, Tasting of Smoke*) in Tehran in 2007.

Early in February 1996, Kasra'i had a heart operation in Vienna and died a few days later. He was buried in the artists' section of Vienna's Central Cemetery.

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