



## KELIDAR

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**KELIDAR**, a monumental novel of nearly three thousand pages in five volumes consisting of ten books published over the period 1978-84 by Maḥmud Dawlatābādi (Mahmud Dowlatabadi; b. 1940), the noted Iranian novelist and ardent social realist.

*Kelidar* is the saga of a nomadic Kurdish family that moved to Sabzevār, Khorasan. The story is set against the highly charged political climate in Iran after World War II, between 1946 and 1949. The locale of the story covers a rather vast area in this region with its surrounding plains, villages, and small towns, an area where Dawlatābādi was born and later chose as the stage for most of his fictional work. Kelidar, or, according to the author's pronunciation, Klidar (Emami, p. 82), is the name of a mountain and a village in northeastern Iran (Korāsān-e Rażawi province).

“Illustrating the tragic fate of the Iranian peasantry and the nomadic tribes in a period of power politics,” (Navvabpour, p. 433; see also Talattof, pp. 78-79) and based on actual events (Nuri'alā' p. 7; Emami, p. 88), the novel follows the trials and tribulations of the Kalmiši family and is peopled with an array of supporting characters. It begins with a memorable scene, which is described in a heroic, lyrical and sensual language. Mārāl, a young Kurdish girl, proudly and majestically leads her horse toward the town's prison to visit her father, 'Abdus, and her fiancé, Delāvar. It is through Mārāl's visit to the town and her traveling back to the Kalmišis that the other main characters of the novel are introduced. Mārāl's paternal aunt, Belqays, the matriarch of the family and the linking thread for the novel's events and characters, and her husband,



Kalmiši, have three sons and a daughter: Khan Moḥammad, Gol-Moḥammad, Beg Moḥammad, and Širu. Severe drought has deprived this shepherding family of their livelihood, and the dry farming they have resorted to yields no crops.

Gol-Moḥammad, the second son of the family, having just returned from mandatory military service and already married, falls in love with his cousin, Mārāl, and marries her. The marriage plants the seeds of hostility in Mārāl's former fiancé, Delāvar. As the story progresses, the tension among different clans and families escalates, and in the course of quarrels and feuds over various issues Gol-Moḥammad kills a man from another family. The incident brings about a visit from two gendarmes to the Kalmiši tribal tent under the pretext of collecting taxes on the nonexistent cattle. Sensing that the gendarmes are there to investigate the murder, Gol-Moḥammad kills them and burns their bodies. He is arrested and jailed but eventually escapes with the assistance of Sattār, a political activist and a member of Iran's Tudeh party (see [COMMUNISM i](#) and [ii](#)), who works in the region as a wandering cobbler and envisions Gol-Moḥammad as the prospective leader of a popular uprising. Following his escape from prison, Gol-Moḥammad is joined by a number of supporters who assist him in a Robin Hood style of existence, fighting against the major landholders and officials who oppress the poor villagers and tribal people of the meager fruits of their labor. Rumors about Gol-Moḥammad and his band of armed men spread throughout the region. Wrapped in an aura of awe, love, and exaggerated expectations, he gradually outgrows the confines of his role and emerges as a folk hero and champion of the poor. The wealthy landlords and government officials succeed in their efforts to eradicate the unrest, and the novel ends with the killing of almost all the men affiliated with the Kalmiši family, as well as Sattār, who ignores the instructions of the Tudeh party and fights to his death in support of Gol-Moḥammad. The story ends in 1949, which coincides with an assassination attempt against the Iranian monarch by a member of the Tudeh party. The Tudeh party was banned from the public sphere, quashing the hopes of its members for the realization of their political ideals (Mir'ābedini, p. 874).

*Kelidar* enjoyed immense popularity and created a stir in intellectual circles even before the publication of its final volumes. The first three volumes appeared in the turbulent years before and after the revolution of 1979 and were a huge commercial success. Twenty thousand copies were sold before the publication of the complete five-volume set in 1984 (Emami, p. 84;



Navvabpour, p. 432).

Dawlatābādi earned high critical acclaim for his complex depiction of characters, who often reveal their true nature through their physical characteristics and appearances; his vivid descriptions (Kāksār, pp. 64-67); his ability to offer a well-substantiated documentary on the physical, social, and political features of the region (Yavari, 1997, pp. 588-89; Miršādeqi, pp. 677-78); his playful use of language, conveyed through the interplay of sand, cloud, and wind to describe the desert climate (Ghanoonparvar, 1989, p. 356); and his creation of verbal rhythms and crescendos to accentuate the more dramatic moments of the story (Emami, p. 89). The novel, which was described by a critic as an “epic of decline” (Navvabpour, p. 433), also won the praise of commentators as a significant event in the history of modern Persian literature (Yarshater, pp. 105-9; Kāksār, pp. 58-59; Nuri’alā’, pp. 7-43); the author was also deemed a qualified nominee for a Nobel Prize in literature (Mo’ayyad, p. 123).

Not all critics, however, concurred with the high applause of the admirers of the novel. [Hušang Golširi](#) (1937-2000), the eminent intellectual and writer, was among the early critics of the initial volumes of the novel. Basing his argument on the assumingly incompatible demands of the traditional techniques of oral storytelling and the requirements of the novelistic genre, he held that the work marks a regression in the history and development of the modern Persian novel (Golširi, pp. 314-33). In a similar vein, the noted novelist Mahšid Amiršāhi (b. 1939) targeted the most praised aspect of the novel: namely, its language. She criticized it for improper grammar, diction, and spelling; the use of English and French terms by characters whose language would be unlikely to include such loanwords; and even for linguistic anachronisms (Amiršāhi, pp. 165-66). Another critic maintained that Dawlatābādi’s choice of narrative language, embellished by the infusion of the classical language of *Tāriḵ-e Bayhaqi* (q.v.) with the current language of the region, although aesthetically pleasing, “is often incompatible with simple subject matters and rural concepts.” (Miršādeqi, p. 318)

It should be noted, however, that the epic-like melodic quality of much of the novel (Ghanoonparvar, 1989, p. 357; Nuri’alā’, p. 40); its often lyrical language in the description of romantic scenes; the folksy tone of many characters, reminiscent of traditional storytellers (Ghanoonparvar, 1991, pp. 96-101); together with its enormous length and breadth, the diversity and strength of its colorful characters, its capturing of many vanishing and changing aspects



of the culture and folklore of the region, and its treatment of a distinctive period of Iranian social and political history, have all contributed to the sustained popularity of the novel.

*Kelidar*, in contrast to the experimental structure and often enigmatic narrative strategies of much of modern Persian fiction, follows a traditional linear narrative mode (Ghanoonparvar, 1989, pp. 355-56; Nuri'alā', p. 21) that, given the length of the novel and the large number of characters and events, is reader friendly and does not overwhelm and confuse the reader in trying to reconstruct the chronology of events. Also, in contrast to the works of such authors as [Sadeq Chubak](#), whose reproduction of conversational Persian presents difficulties for the reader, the traditional narrative style of *Kelidar* coupled with Dawlatābādi's manipulation of the colloquial dialects to produce a language closer to standard written Persian (Mo'ayyad, pp. 116-18; Nuri'alā', pp. 39-40) and his introduction of heightened dramatic passages in the texture of the narrative to describe its climactic moments (Yavari, 1989, p. 97) have made the novel accessible to a wider audience. An abridged German translation of *Kelidar* by Sigrid Lotfi was published in Zurich in 1999.

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