



MAHJUB, MOHAMMAD JA'FAR

MAHJUB, MOHAMMAD JA'FAR (Moḥammad Ja'far Maḥjub, b. Tehran, 1 Šahrivar 1303 Š./23 August 1924; d. Los Angeles, 27 Bahman 1374 Š./17 February 1996) prominent scholar of Persian literature, essayist, translator, university teacher, and one of the founders of the discipline of folklore in Iran (FIGURE 1).

LIFE

Although Maḥjub's given name was Moḥammad Ja'far, his family called him by the nickname, Amir. His father, 'Ali Akbar, was born in Tehran in 1871, although his ancestors may have immigrated to Tehran from the Bahḫtiāri region (Maḥjub, 2006, pp. 1-5). He was an apothecary (*'aṭṭār*), who went on to take the examination at Dār al-fonun, and received a permit to work as a druggist (*dārusāz*). He had learned Arabic and some French in the course of his education. The family of his mother, Noṣrat al-Šari'a, had moved to Tehran from the village of Sinak at the outskirts of the city. It was his father's sister, who arranged for her brother, a fifty-two year old bachelor, to marry Maḥjub's mother, who taught at the girls' school that she had established at their family home. Maḥjub was a precocious child and learned the alphabet as he freely went from class to class. Once his parents realized that he could read, his father taught him the Qur'an, and Maḥjub had read the entire text by the age of seven (Maḥjub, 2006, pp. 1-11).

At the age of six or seven, he was tested to determine which grade he should be assigned to. He was allowed to go to the fourth grade. Maḥjub, who was



quite small even for his age, was regularly bullied by his classmates, who were three or four years his senior. This may have been the source of his later interest in physical education and may have fueled his studies of 'ayyāri and javānmardi, which in their honor codes emphasize the protection of the poor and the vulnerable.

Mahjub entered high school as a frail ten-year-old child in 1934 and continued to remain the object of bullying and abuse. He changed high schools several times and started a period of malingering that resulted in some academic failure. Once, he was called to the principal's office and was advised that, unless he strengthened himself, he would certainly not live through the next year. Terrified, he ran home and hysterically demanded that his parents provide him with means of exercising. One of his maternal uncles who frequented a traditional gymnasium (*zur-kāna*) bought him a pair of traditional implements of physical training, and he threw himself into exercising during his adolescent years (Mahjub, 2006, pp. 26-29). His obsession with physical training and his habitual truancy resulted in his failing the third year of secondary school. During the following summer, he began to work at a relative's weaving workshop. He completed the fifth grade of high school in 1941 (Mahjub, 2006, p. 30).

To complete his high school education, Mahjub first enrolled at the Veterinary College (Madrasa-ye 'āli-ye beytāri; see *Dām pezeški*) and later, in November 1943, at the *Alborz College*, where he found himself studying with such teachers as Parviz Nātel Kānlari (1914-1991; see KHANLARI [pending]), Maḥmud Ṣanā'i, Dabiḥ-Allāh Ṣafā (1911-1999), and *Naṣr-Allāh Falsafi*, who all rose to prominence in their later academic careers. He graduated from Alborz in 1944. Throughout the period of studying at Alborz, Mahjub also worked as a carpenter's apprentice in the evenings in order to support himself (Mahjub, 2006, pp. 33-39). He obtained his bachelor's degree in political science from Tehran University in 1947. Meanwhile he got a job as a stenographer at the Majles, and he continued in the position until 1963.

While working at the Majles, Mahjub was recruited into the Tudeh Party (see *Communism* i and ii) and was assigned to its press division (Afšār, 1966, pp. 8-9), where he remained for some ten years. He and Šāhroḳ Meskub (1925-2005) worked as staff writers at the newspaper, *Qiyām-e Irān*. Many of the unsigned editorials that were published in the newspaper throughout 1947-48 were penned by Mahjub (Mahjub, 2006, p. 89). He continued to write on national politics for *Qiyām-e Irān* until it was shut down in 1949, after the



assassination attempt against the shah (Meskub, p. 175). Following the closing of *Qiyām-e Irān*, Mahjub moved on to other newspapers and magazines such as *Be su-ye āyanda*, the unofficial publicity organ of the Tudeh Party. His work at the leftist press during his Tudeh Party years and his translations from French and Arabic gave him enough confidence to jointly author with 'Ali Akbar Farzāmpur a handbook on composition, largely in order to spare students the pains that he had suffered in his composition classes. This handbook was published as *Fann-e negāreš yā rāhnemā-ye enšā'* in 1954 and has been reprinted many times since.

Disillusioned by the Tudeh Party's stance with respect to the nationalization of Iran's oil industry, its blind obedience to Moscow, and its failure to protect its members, many of whom were captured and executed as a result of the Party's inattention to security (see [Communism iii. In Persia after 1953](#)) after the coup that ended the premiership of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq (see [Coup d'Etat of 1332 Š./1953](#)), he severed all relationship with it (Mahjub, 2006, pp. 64-73; idem, 2002, p. 24). He was especially devastated by the arrest and execution of Morteżā Keyvān (1921-1954), whom he had introduced to the Tudeh Party, and for whom he had served as one of his two membership sponsors. "I remain quite unable to come to terms with his loss. Every so often I dream that Morteżā Kayvān is still alive, but is very sick or is weak and needs taking care of in order to get better. I feel a great deal of guilt about this" (Mahjub, 2006, p. 74). He comes back to Keyvān's arrest and execution again and again in the course of his interviews (Mahjub, 2006, pp. 73-74, 76, 84-86, 116-17). Perhaps this profound feeling of guilt prevented him from ever meddling in politics again, as he kept strictly to scholarly endeavors for the rest of his life.

Following a short period of cooperation with the periodical *Şadaf*, Mahjub was invited to contribute articles to *Soḵan*, the outstanding monthly literary journal edited and published in Tehran by Parviz Nātel Kānlari, Mahjub's former teacher. He published a number of scholarly articles and book reviews in *Soḵan* and maintained his relationship with it until it was shut down in 1978 (Meskub, p.176). His work with *Soḵan* is not only important from a literary point of view, but it also marks the beginning of his folkloristic studies.

He received his second bachelor's degree from Tehran University in Persian literature in 1954. During this time, he also taught at various private high schools such as Hadaf and K̄ārazmi, where he was highly regarded by the administrators and students alike. He was appointed as Assistant Professor at



the [Teachers Training College](#) in 1960 and received his Ph.D. in Persian literature from Tehran University in 1963. His dissertation was later published as *Sabk-e korāsāni dar še'r-e fārsi* (Khorasani style in Persian poetry, Tehran, 1966) to high critical acclaim. It has gone through several printings since its publication and is widely considered as standard book for the subject (Parvin Gonābādi, pp. 606-9).

Mahjub attained to full professorship of Persian literature at the Teachers Training College in 1968 and taught a number of courses at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Tehran. He was invited to teach at Oxford University as a visiting scholar in the academic year of 1971-72. He was a guest professor at the University of Strasbourg in the academic year of 1972-73. In 1974 he was appointed Iran's cultural attaché in Pakistan, a job that he held until 1979. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, when the directors of the National Academy of Language and Literature (Farhangestān-e zabān o adab) and the National Academy of Art (Farhangestān-e honar) were purged, Mahjub agreed to take over both positions, and he served as the caretaker of these institutions from 1979 to 1980. However, it did not take long for him to resign from both positions and leave the country for Paris, where he gave a series of weekly lectures on Persian folk literature at École Pierre Brossolette. The lectures were arranged by the noted poet Yadollāh Royā'i (Meskub, p.182). Mahjub taught as a visiting professor of Persian literature at the University of Strasbourg from 1982 to 1984 (Mahjub, 2006, p. 135) and was the President of the Persian Cultural Society in Paris from 1986 to 1993.

After a few years of living in Europe, Mahjub moved to the United States, and he began teaching at the University of California, Berkeley in 1991. He continued teaching his classes almost to the end of his life, even though he had been weakened by the attack of prostate cancer that finally took his life (Pārsinežād, p. 85). Mahjub was a most interesting conversationalist, adorning his talk with jokes and lines of verse. His skills as a lecturer were as great as his prodigious memory, which left a lasting mark on his friends, students, and listeners (Afšār, 2004, p. 822; Daryābandari, p. 28; Mahdavi-Dāmḡāni, p. 581). His lectures in his classes were taped and have recently been published in Iran as compact discs by the publishers of *Māhur Music Quarterly*. Mahjub died at the age of seventy-two in Berkeley, California as a result of his cancer.

WORK

Folklore studies. Mahjub's contributions to [folklore studies](#), which began after



the publication of [Sadeq Hedayat](#)'s pioneering collection of folk beliefs in his *Neyrangestān* (Tehran, 1933) and Henri Massé's (1886-1969) *Croyances et coutumes persanes suivies de contes et chansons populaires* (Les littératures populaires de toutes les nations, N.S. 4, Paris, 1938), may not strictly fall within the Western definition of folklore, which in a broad sense, defines folk stories as narratives of unknown authorship that exist in multiple versions. But what Mahjub concentrated on in his studies was a variety of written folklore called *adab-e 'avām* or *adab-e avāmāna*, which may or may not be of "unknown" authorship. For instance, the life and career of Naqib al-Mamālek, the court storyteller or *naqqālbāši* of Nāṣer al-Din Shah (r. 1848-96) and author of the story of [Amir Arsalān](#), which Mahjub edited in 1961, are quite well known and documented, while such similar books as *Dāstān-e Širuya* and *Dalila-ye moḥtāla*, which existed in written form at least since the 11th century C.E., and which are not considered to be part of Iran's "literary canon," are of unknown authorship.

It is not "folklore" in its Western sense that Mahjub studied and brought into Persian literary history but the genre of "folksy" narrative that exists in that mediating space which separates the formal literature of the elite from the more accessible written narratives of the folk (*'avām*). For this reason, Mahjub divides *adab-e 'avām*, which may be loosely translated as "folksy literature," into that which exists only in oral form and was never committed to paper, and that which existed in written form from day one. This important feature of Persian folklore is often neglected by scholars who function within the Western paradigm of what constitutes "folklore" and what is identified as "literature." To quote Mahjub: "What I have done has been to focus on a very small area of written folk stories" (Mahjub, 2006, pp.131-32).

For his edition of *Amir Arsalān*, Mahjub collated a lithograph copy dated 1315 AH/1898 with a manuscript that belonged to the Malek Library, and he provided an extensive introduction on the language of the text and its place in the literary tradition (Hanaway, p. 958). The *Amir Arsalān* was published in 1961 in 10,000 copies, and was soon sold out. A second printing of another 10,000 had to be published.

Encouraged by Kānlari to contribute articles on the genres of Persian folk tradition to *Soḵan*, Mahjub undertook fieldwork on a form of coffeehouse folk oratory known as *soḵanvari*. He borrowed and studied several *soḵanvari* manuscripts (see [Bayāz](#)), and wrote three articles on the subject, which were published in *Soḵan* (9/6, pp. 530–35; 9/7, pp. 631–37; 9/8, pp. 779–86). They were



reprinted, along with his series of twenty-two articles on various traditional Persian stories, originally published in *Soḡan*, as *Adabiyāt-e āmiāne-ye Irān: Majmu'a-ye maqālāt darbāra-ye afsānahā va ādāb o rosum-e mardom-e Irān* (Tehran, 2002). Compiled by Ḥasan D̄olfaqāri, the book also offers a biography of Mahjub and a fairly complete bibliography of his works.

Mahjub's most important contribution to the field is his highly acclaimed *Farhang-e loḡāt-e āmiyāna* (A dictionary of folk expressions), which is attributed to [Mohammad-'Ali Jamalzadeh](#). It should be noted, however, that Jamalzadeh's actual contribution to this volume was the submission of a collection of notes on such expressions. During one of Iraj Afšār's visits to him in Switzerland, Jamalzadeh asked him to see to it that his notes on Persian slang would be published (Afšār, 2004, p. 833). Afšār told him that Mahjub was the only qualified person for the task in Iran, and Jamalzadeh gave his notes to Afšār and asked him to pass them on to Mahjub for publication. In the course of preparing these notes for printing, Mahjub not only corrected the numerous errors of the original text, but also increased the dictionary's bulk by nearly one-third. Furthermore, he wrote a detailed introduction to the volume, which is an archetypal treatise in its own right. He later supervised the publication of the volume in Iran (Mahjub, 2006, pp. 127-29). Following the publication of this dictionary and his series of essays on folk literature, Mahjub's reputation in the field grew remarkably. Jalāl al-Din Homā'i praised him as the man who added a lost chapter to the study of Persian literature (Matini, p. 2; Mahdavi Dāmḡāni, p. 866).

Critical editions of classical texts. Mahjub learned the art of editing from the great scholars whom he assisted in their work. He proofread Modarres-e Rażavi's edition of the *Divan* of [Anwari](#), and closely worked with [Badi'-al-Zamān Foruzanfar](#) in editing Rumi's *Divan-e Šams*, as well as Foruzanfar's *Aḡādiṭ-e Maṭnavi*. He also helped with Parvin Gonābādi's translation of [Ebn Kaldun's](#) *al-Moqaddama* into Persian (Mahjub, 2006, pp. 165-70). Mahjub's long treatise on [Kalila va Demna](#), originally his B.A. essay, appeared in two installments in *Farhang-e Irān-zamin*, a research quarterly published by Iraj Afšār (vol. 5, 1957, pp. 97-26; vol. 7, 1959, pp. 253-82; reprinted in an independent volume as *Dar bāra-ye Kalila va Demna: Tāriḡča, tarjoma-hā, va do bāb-e tarjoma našoda az Kalila va Demna* (Tehran, 1957). Although more than half a century old, this essay remains an excellent study of the subject. Mahjub had also prepared an edition of the text of the *Kalila va Demna*. However, because he found out that Mojabā Minovi (1903-1976) was working



on an edition of the text, he shelved his edition and did not pursue the project any further.

It appears that Minovi was also irked by Mahjub's work on another literary text that he had edited himself, namely, *Vis o Rāmin*, an 11th-century romance in verse by Faḡr al-Din As'ad Gorgāni. In his preface to the work Minovi promised to publish his notes and comments on the work in an independent volume. But that volume never appeared (Mahjub, 2006, pp. 124-25). Mahjub's edition of the romance with a detailed Introduction was published in 1959.

Mahjub also edited the divans of Qā'āni (1957), Soruš-e Eṣfahāni (1960), *Iraj Mirza* (1962; 'Obayd Zākāni, published posthumously as *Kolliyāt-e 'Obayd-e Zākāni* (New York, 1999; Bozorg-e 'Alavi (pp. 5-9), the text of Mahjub's last interview with Nāṣer Zerā'ti and Morteżā Negāhi, in which he reminisces about his life and expresses some of his opinions about Persian literature and culture (pp. 9-33), and an introductory essay, entitled "Soḡani bā ḡ'ānanda" (pp. 33-41). In this introductory essay, Mahjub argues that careful study of Iran's written heritage is Iran's main defense against encroaching decay of Persian culture. The volume, although written in Mahjub's typically clear and elegant prose, is somewhat uneven. Some of its papers are quite accessible and even somewhat elementary. They are clearly designed to help the uninitiated through the more difficult passages of classical Persian prose and poetry. Others, such as the pieces on the constitutional revolution and Persian literature—"Mašruṭiyat va še'r o adab-e Pārsi" (pp. 431-42) and "Maḡmud o Ayāz: 'eṣḡ yā šahvat" (pp. 379-88)—are more in line with academic writings.

A somewhat neglected aspect of Mahjub's scholarship is his skill in writing reviews. Of note is his extensive commentary on *Ḥāfeḡ be sa'y-e Sāyeh* by Hušang Ebtehāj, in which he disputed several of the latter's emendations. (For the text of the article see "Darbāra-ye *Ḥāfeḡ be sa'y-e Sāyeh*," *Kelk* 60, Esfand 1373 Š./March 1995, pp. 252-75.) His sarcastic review of Nāṣer-al-Din Šāh-Ḥoseyni's edition of Suzani-e Samarḡandi's *Divān (Rāhnamā-ye Ketāb 2/4*, 1338 Š./1960, pp. 550-59) displays the stylistic flourish of Mahjub. Few scholars have contributed in so many different ways to the knowledge of the various aspects of Persian culture and literature.

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The Iron Heel (Jack London, 1907), under the pseudonym, “M. Şobhdam,” as *Pāšna-ye āhanin*, Tehran, ca. 1953.

The Pearl (John Steinbeck, 1947), as *Enteqām-e morvārid*, Tehran, 1949.

South Sea Tales (Jack London, 1911), as *Dāstānhā-ye Daryā-ye Jonub*, Tehran, 1951.

Mahjub’s interpretation and recitation of the selected tales of Ferdowsi’s *Šāhnāma*, and Sa’di’s *Bustān*, as well poems of Nezami Ganjavi, Hafez, and Rumi, are recorded on audio compact discs in his attractive voice (available at Musicshop, (<http://www.musicshopir.com/category/51-classical-literature.aspx>)).

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