



MAHMUD, AHMAD

MAHMUD, AHMAD (Aḥmad Maḥmud, also known as Aḥmad E'tā', b. [Ahvaz](#), 4 Dey 1310/26 December 1931; d. Tehran, 12 Mehr 1381/4 October 2002), contemporary novelist and short story writer ([Figure 1](#), [Figure 2](#)).

LIFE

Ahmad Mahmud was the eldest child in a large working class family. His mother was from [Dezful](#) in Khuzestan, and his father, Moḥammad 'Ali, was a building contractor who was sporadically employed by the [Anglo-Persian Oil Company](#). Mahmud received his primary education at Kamāl and Kayyām schools and continued at Šāpur high school, to which there are several references in his novels (Āqā'i, p. 9). His years as an upper classman in the early 1950s coincided with the political movements that culminated in the nationalization of the oil industry (see [Oil Agreements in Iran: 1901-1978](#)), and Mahmud, in line with many of his contemporaries, joined the Tudeh party (see [Communism ii: in Persia from 1941 to 1953](#)). He was soon arrested and imprisoned and was subsequently expelled from school. Upon being released, he began his mandatory military service, but he was dishonorably discharged for his political activities and was later exiled to [Bandar-e Lengeh](#), a small port city on the Persian Gulf, where he wrote his unpublished novel, *Ranj o omid* (Pain and hope), in which he explored the root causes of depression among the youth following the United States-assisted [coup d'état of 1953](#) (Dastḡayb, p. 11). His return to Ahvaz comprises the events of "Bāzgašt" (The return), a story in the collection *Didār* (The visit, 1990; [Figure 3](#)). Burdened by difficulties in finding employment in Ahvaz due to his leftist political background, he moved



to Jiroft, a city near [Kerman](#). He returned to Ahvaz once again in 1962.

Mahmud was incarcerated and banished for more than five years to different regions, including Tehran, [Shiraz](#), [Jahrom](#), Lār, and Lengeh. Reading filled his ample leisure time while in prison and exile and profoundly influenced his literary repertoire (Golestān, 2004, p. 51). *Dāstān-e yek šahr* (The tale of a town, 1981; [Figure 4](#)) is Mahmud's rendition of his prison term in Tehran, which coincided with the socio-political turbulences that led to the fall of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq's cabinet and the later arrest and execution of [Ḥosayn Fāṭemi](#), who served as the minister of foreign affairs in Mosaddeq's cabinet (Golestān, pp. 151-52).

Shuttling back and forth between more than twenty menial jobs in several cities, Mahmud eventually settled in Tehran in the winter of 1967, where he worked multiple jobs, including one for Radio Iran (Āqā'i, pp. 18-19), and was eventually appointed as the assistant director of Kār-Jāmeḥ, a clothing factory. He resigned after the 1979 Revolution and devoted himself fully to writing (Golestān, p. 51).

Mahmud married his cousin, Ṭāhereh, in 1949 when he was barely 18 years old (Nābet, p. 120). They had four children: Sārak, Bābak, Siāmak, and Sa'ideh. On Friday, 4 October 2002, at the age of 71, Mahmud succumbed to respiratory failure, partly attributed to his excessive smoking. He was buried next to Aḥmad Šāmlu, [Hušang Golširi](#), Moḥammad Moktāri and [Moḥammad-Ja'far Puyandeh](#) in the cemetery at the Emānzādeh Ṭāher in Karaj ([Figure 5](#)).

WORKS

Short stories. Although initially interested in cinema (Bāqeri, 2003, p. 312), as manifested in his writings, in particular *Madār-e šefr darajeh* (The zero degree latitude, 1993; [Figure 6](#)), Mahmud nevertheless went on to be a prolific writer with nine short story collections, six novels, and two film scripts, often set in southern cities and villages, and punctuated with references to the contemporary history of Iran spanning from the 1950s to the late 1980s, incorporating pivotal historical moments of the coup d'état of 1953, the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the 1980-88 [Iran-Iraq War](#).

He inaugurated his literary career in the early 1950s, when his first short story, "Ṣob mišeh" (Ṣobḥ mišavad; The morning is around), was published in 1955 in *Omid-e Irān*, a journal founded in Tehran by 'Ali-Akbar Ṣafipur in 1953



(Golestān, p. 43). The story appeared under the pseudonym Ahmad Ahmad, which he subsequently changed to Ahmad Mahmud to avoid confusion with the pen name of another writer, Aḥmad Musavi (Mahmud in Āqā'i, p. 25; Maghsoudlou, 2004). *Mul* (Paramour, 1957; Figure 7), Mahmud's first collection of eight short stories, which initially appeared in *Naqš-e Jahān*, a journal founded in 1941 by Ḥosayn Nursādeqi in Tehran (Āqā'i, p. 12), was later self-published in Ahvaz in a run of 500 copies. While in Jiroft, *Daryā hanuz ārām ast* (The sea is still calm, 1960), his second collection of four short stories was published by Gutenberg in 3,000 copies (Golestān, p. 43). It was followed by the publication of *Bihudegi* (Futility), his third collection of three stories in 1962.

Distinctly influenced by Sadeq Hedayat and Sadeq Chubak, as stated by Mahmud himself (S. Mahmud et al., 2005, p. 190) and noted by critics (Bāqeri, p. 315; Golestān, p. 52), the collections nevertheless heralded a writer in search of a voice of his own. Loneliness, poverty, suppressed sexual desire, unemployment, anxiety, and death appear as recurrent motifs in the stories of the collections.

The publication of *Zā'eri zir-e bārān* (A pilgrim under the rain, 1967; Figure 8) marked a transitional period in Mahmud's literary journey that culminated in the appearance of his highly acclaimed works of fiction (Mir'ābedini, 1998, p. 566). In several stories of the collection, there was a gradual substitution of a descriptive rendition of events and characters in place of the signature reporting style by which his earlier stories are recognized (e.g. "Mošibat-e kabkhā" (The partridge mishap), "Zir-e bārān" (Under the rain), "Āsemān-e kur" (The blind sky), and "Dar sāyeh-ye sepidārḥā" (In the shadow of the white poplars). The story "Zir-e bārān" of this collection was translated into German by Carla Roostaeian and published in *Im Atem Des Drachen: Moderne Persische Erzählungen* by Touradj Rahnema in 1991. It was also translated into Armenian by Khachik Galoosian and published in *Contemporary Iranian Short Stories* (1960-1970, Moscow). "Barḳord" (Encounter), also of this collection earned the praise of Bozorg Alavi for its realistic portrayal of the turmoil of everyday life in the southern regions (Alavi, pp. 39-40). The influence of Sadeq Chubak's *Antar-i ke luṭi-aš mordeh bud* (1949, tr. by Peter Avery, as *The Baboon Whose Buffoon Was Dead*, 1957) is readily discernable in "Anṭar-e teryāki" (The opium addict baboon) from this collection.

Ġaribehā (The strangers, 1971) and *Pesarak-e bumi* (The little native boy, 1971), initially published separately, appeared as a single volume in 1974 (Figure 9). Ne'mat, the protagonist of "Ġaribehā," arguably the most noted story in the



eponymous collection, is arrested after attacking a food supply wagon. He is buried up to his neck in a hole and is gradually transformed into a plaster statue. Mahmud's choice of a child as the eyewitness narrator of what transpires, along with his appropriation of nature as the psychological landscape of the tale, play a significant role in generating the macabre tone of the story. Mahmud's sharp-edged criticism of the government's socio-economic policies is well reflected in his grim depiction of abandoned villages and ill-fated townships in several stories of the collection, including "Šahr-e kučak-e mā" (Our small town) and "Āsemān-e ābi-e Dez" (The blue sky of Dez). "Šahr-e kučak-e mā," arguably the most noted story in this collection, unfolds with the sudden arrival of bulldozers to install oil refinery facilities in a township: "*Bāmdād-e yek ruz-e garm āmadand o bā tabar oftādand be jān-e naḵlhā-ye boland-pāyeh*" (p. 89) (Early one hot morning they came and uprooted the tall palm trees with their hatchets.) Its abrupt ending leaves little ambiguity for the reader to imagine the future course of life of the adolescent narrator of the story, along with the uprooted inhabitants of the township: "*Tah-e kučeh rā negāh kardam. Pedaram rā nadidam. U rafteh bud o man māndeh budem bā bār-e sangini ke bāyesti be duš mikešidam*" (p. 100) (I looked at the end of the alley. I didn't see my father. He was gone and I was left with heavy responsibilities to shoulder.) The story, as argued by a critic, delineates, retrospectively, the rite of passage as experienced by the young narrator, whose banishment from the secure world of his childhood is metaphorically exemplified in the disappearance of the palm groves, which were uprooted overnight (Pāyandeh, 2010, pp. 241-43; translations: Russian, in *Iranian Contemporary Short Stories*, Moscow, 1960-1970; German, by Sigrid Lotfi, in Touradj Rahnema, ed., *Einer aus Gilan. Kritische Erzählungen aus Persien*, Berlin, 1984). As noted by a critic, in Mahmud's uninterrupted style of narration, words are deployed to turn the whole story into one sentence, phrased only to tell the tale of a doomed to failure battle (Sepānlu, 1989, 443-45).

In "Pesarak-e bumi" of the eponymous collection, Šahru, a teenage boy in southern Iran falls in love with Betty, a teenage British girl. The story acquires momentum when the populace, revolting against the British, set Betty's father's car on fire, and it culminates with the tragic burning of Šahru in an attempt to rescue Betty (translations: English, by Judith Wilks, as "The Little Native Boy," in Mansur Heshmat Moayyad, ed., *Stories from Iran: A Chicago Anthology 1921-1991*, Washington D.C., 1991; German, by Manfred Lorenz, in Bozorg Alavi, ed., *Die beiden Ehemänner Prosa aus dem Iran*, Berlin, 1984).



Didār, Mahmud's next collection comprises two short stories, "Kojā miri naneh Amru?" (Where are you going Naneh Amru?) and "Didār," as well as a novella, "Bāzgašt." Told by a third-person omniscient narrator, the stories are also credited for Mahmud's innovative intervention in the narrative as the inner voice of the fictional characters, making them respond to his comments and questions, registering their thoughts and feelings, and inserting these within brackets throughout the text (Ojākiāns, 2006, p. 159).

The protagonist of "Bāzgašt," Garšāsb (known in the story as Šāsb), who is reminiscent of Kāled in *Dāstān-e yek šahr*, or rather, Mahmud himself, returns to Ahvaz to start a new life after five years of internal exile, only to crumble under the heavy burden of a troubled past. When he eventually lands a job in a bank, the manager of the bank turns out to be a government informant. Šāsb leaves the bank but is once again wrongly incriminated and arrested (translation: German, by Sabine Allafi, as *Die Rückkehr*, Frankfurt, 1997).

The six stories of *Qeṣṣeh-ye āšenā* (A familiar tale, 1991; [Figure 10](#)), are generally set in the backdrop of the post Iran-Iraq War period and revolve around the fates and fortunes in people's life when poverty is rife. In the title story, the longest in the collection, Mahmud employs disrupted timelines to narrate the story through flashbacks and flash-forwards (Golestān, p. 6), while "Jost-o ju" (Search) and "Sotun-e šekasteh" (The broken column) reflect the miseries inflicted on the populace during the Iran-Iraq War with a scenario style of narration.

Twenty-three of Mahmud's previously published stories appeared in a volume, entitled *Az mosāfer tā tabkāl* in 1992. ([Figure 11](#))

Novels. Hamsāyehā (The Neighbors, [Figure 12](#)), written in 1963 and published in 1966 (Golestān, p. 44), is the first installment in a historical trilogy of novels and arguably the most noted of them. It revolves around the adolescent years of Kāled, the protagonist whom the three stories share, who suffers along with the country as it undergoes fundamental transformation from the Mosaddeq era, through the decades following the 1953 coup, and the long war with Iraq (Golširi, 1999, pp. 340-41). A teenager during the years when the Iranian oil industry, formerly run by the British, was nationalized, Kāled lives in a small, shabby rental house in Ahvaz, surrounded by workingclass neighbors, including Amān Āqā and his young wife, Bolur Kānom, with whom Kāled develops a secret love affair. After working for a short period of time in Amān Āqā's teahouse to support his parents and his eight-year-old sister Jamileh,



Ḳāled quits his job, abandons his relationship with Bolur Ḳānom, falls in love with a girl named Siāh-češm (lit., black-eyed), and is transformed from a naive teenage boy into a political activist and a member of the Communist Tudeh Party. Politically immature, however, he is ultimately arrested and imprisoned. The novel ends with Ḳāled's release from prison and being paroled to serve his mandatory military service.

The book was first published under different titles, including “Ṭarḩ,” and “Rāz-e kučak-e Jamileh,” in such journals as *Jong-e Jonub*, *Ferdowsi*, and *Payām-e novin* (for details see Golestān, p. 92). It was eventually published in 1975, with the support of Ebrāhim Yunesi (1926-2012), who also appears as a prisoner in the novel (Maghsoudlou, 2004). Immediately banned for its political overtones, it was reprinted after the 1979 revolution, only to be banned again, this time for its sexually explicit content and imagery. However, the novel received considerable praise and was read widely, and its unauthorized reprint continued to be a bestseller for several years. It earned the praise of literary critics as an outstanding novel within the confines of social realism (Tavakkoli-Moqaddam, pp. 33-41). Critics have also traced the influence on the novel's structure and characterization of Maxim Gorky's *The Mother* (1907) and Zaharia Stancu's *Barefoot* (1948), both available in Persian translation, (Golširi, pp. 364-373; Eshāqiān, 2009, pp. 23-32).

Hamsāyehā is translated into English by Nastaran Kherad as *The Neighbors* (Austin, 2013), to critical acclaim, as well as into several other languages including German, Russian, and Iraqi Kurdish. It was also made into a film script by Dāriuš Mehrju'i but has yet to be filmed (Dastgayb, p. 53).

In *Dāstān-e yek šahr*, a sequel to *Hamsāyehā*, Ḳāled, whose name is mentioned only once in the novel, is a 20-year-old cadet. Stripped of rank following the coup d'état of 1953, he is sent to internal exile in Lengeh. Transformed by the experiences of exile and prison, and deeply disturbed by a former comrade who has turned into an informant, he shows little interest in political activities and is ensnared instead by the pain of a generation of his comrades who dreamt for a better world, only to realize that they have been betrayed.

As in *Hamsāyehā*, Ḳāled lives an impoverished life in Lengeh and shares a room with 'Ali from a nearby township, frittering away most of his time drinking or sitting in a teahouse trying to forget the aftermath of the 1953 coup, an event which had profound reverberations on the nation's psyche, and his subsequent exilic life in Lengeh. As the story moves on, Ḳāled develops a



relationship with Šarifeh, a prostitute, whose death dramatically affects his life. ‘Ali is killed in a shootout with smugglers, and Kāled, finding a photo in his belongings, realizes that Šarifeh had been ‘Ali’s sister, whom he had pledged to kill for running away from home. With a quick flashback to the opening pages of the novel, Mahmud ends the story with the narrator’s monologue in a mortuary, the same scene with which he had opened the novel.

Mahmud’s cinematic interest is well manifested in his insertion of flashback episodes in the text, offering glimpses into the characters’ pasts. The flashbacks occur minimally in the initial sections but take up entire chapters when Mahmud recalls his years of imprisonment in Tehran and the intense sufferings of his fellow inmates. These ultimately take their toll on the structural coherence and flow of the story (Sepānlu, 1982).

Dāstān-e yek šahr is an extended version of “Az deltangi” (homesickness), a story in *Zā’eri zir-e bārān* and shares several characters with *The Neighbors*, including Jamileh (Kāled’s sister) and Bidār (a political activist turned informant). It abounds in anthropological details of the region, highlighting the dead-end lives of the poor in class-based societies.

Zamin-e sukteh (The scorched land, 1982; [Figure 13](#)), the last novel in the trilogy and Mahmud’s most realistic depiction of war, spans the period from September to December 1980 and chronicles the trials and tribulations of life in the battlefields and war-stricken cities. It unfolds with the reappearance of Kāled, now 35 years old and a newlywed with a 6-month-old child.

The story follows a linear timeline, and portrays the social and political repercussions of the war-stricken city of Ahvaz with journalistic precision (Kherad, 2013b, p. 81). Admiring the patriotic sentiments of the citizens to fight the enemy, on the one hand, and highlighting, from a critical perspective, the dogmatic support of war, on the other, the novel ends with the chaotic scene of the neighborhood being bombarded with most of its inhabitants being killed.

Mahmud’s portrayal of Kāled in the novel is his tribute to the life of his brother, Moḥammad, who was killed in the war, and it is to his memory that the book is dedicated. Mahmud was lauded for his bold depiction of the harsh realities of war-stricken Ahvaz at a time when such realistic portrayals were not appreciated by the revolutionary authorities (Barāheni, 1982, pp. 149-65).

The reappearance of many of the scenes and characters of *Hamsāyehā* in



Dāstān-e yek šahr and *Zamin-e sukteh* has inspired critics to highlight the autobiographical attributes of the trilogy, delineating Mahmud's saga from adolescence to the final decades of his life (Mir'āb edini, p. 481).

Madār-e šefr darajeh was published in 1993 in three volumes and is Mahmud's longest novel (Eshāqiān, 2014, pp. 7-18). The locale is once again southern Iran set against the political backdrop of the post-1953 coup d'état up to the early uprisings of the 1979 Revolution. It revolves around the lives of a diverse cast of characters, who are often diametrically opposed in their political stance or religious convictions. They include leftists and Islamists, guerillas, supporters of the Pahlavi regime, intellectuals, and the illiterate, who disfavor the revolution for totally different reasons. Dialogues, reminiscent of a film script, run through many pages of this lengthy novel (Golestān, p. 81), and recurrent flashbacks offer glimpses into the life of characters who have often appeared in Mahmud's previous novels and short stories. *Ādam-e zendeh* (The living man, 1997; Figure 14) was published in 1997, but it failed to elicit either popularity or the literary success that had been enjoyed by many of his previous works.

Derakt-e anjir-e ma'ābed (The fig tree of temples, 2000; Figure 15) published in two volumes, is Mahmud's final novel, which gradually attains a fantastic overtone. It culminates his long literary journey from socio-realistic fiction to magical realism, which appeared in post-revolutionary Persian literature as the most apropos literary genre to express the incredible political 'realities' that would have otherwise evaded expression within any satisfactory realm of rationality (Talattof, 2000, p. 156; Mir'ābedini, p. 1319). Mahmud's short story "Dard-e farāmuš šodan, dard-e jāvdāneh" (The pain of being forgotten, eternal pain; *Čistā*, No. 104-105, Dey-Bahman 1372 Š./January-February, 1994, pp. 376-79) is also colored by Mahmud's employment of allegorical language (Mir'ābedini, p. 1320). *Mard-e kākkestari* (The gray man), Mahmud's unfinished novel has yet to be published.

Mahmud's fictional characters are often drawn from the lower echelons of society and hold menial jobs in teahouses, prisons, and barbershops. Reminiscent of Jalāl Āriān in *Esmā'il Faṣiḥ*'s novels, *Kāled* is a near presence in the majority of Mahmud's works. Unlike *Fasih*, however, the female characters inhabit the periphery of Mahmud's fictional world and are generally reduced to promiscuous, adulterous prostitutes (e.g., Bolur *Kānom* in *The Neighbors*) or kind, virtuous, and faithful people (e.g., Belqays in *The zero degree latitude*) and, finally, politically active intellectuals (e.g., *Mā'edeh* in *The zero degree*



latitude; Golestān, 2004).

In his early stories Mahmud follows a linear narrative time (Kherad, 2013b, p. 62) and capitalizes on a simple narration style akin to journalistic reporting (Golestān, 2004). In his later works, however, he opts for stream of consciousness, flashbacks, and flash-forwards, which are more pronounced in *Dāstān-e yek šahr* and *Derahkt-e anjir-e ma'ābed*. The presence of an unknown narrator who intervenes in the events is also a unique technique used by Mahmud in many of his works.

Mahmud is regarded as the literary voice of Iran's southern areas (Miršādeqi, 2002, pp. 165-66), and a fervent advocate of social, political, and cultural transformation in the region (Mir'ābedini, p. 566). His stories, reminiscent of Sadeq Chubak and to a lesser extent Simin Daneshvar (1921-2012), are sprinkled with colloquial dictions, phrases, and idioms of southern Iran.

Mahmud was the recipient of several literary awards, including the *Gardun* Award in 1993 (S. Mahmud et al., 2005), the first round of the Golširi Award in 2000 for *Derahkt-e anjir-e ma'ābed*, and the Mehregān Literary Award for his lifelong contributions to the enrichment of modern Persian fiction at the same year (Sa'idi).

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