



MANSURI, ZABIH-ALLAH

MANSURI, ZABIH-ALLAH (مَنْسُورِی زَبیهِ‌اللهِ مَنْسُورِی، Zabiḥ-Allāh Ḥakim-Elāhi Dašti, b. Sanandaj; d. Tehran, 8 June 1986), prolific, and arguably the most widely read journalist, writer, and translator, who also wrote under the pseudonyms “Nāṣer” and “Pištāz” (Etteḥād, 2003, 134). His date of birth is variously recorded as: 1909 (Afšār, 2003, 589; Etteḥād, 2003, 134), 1895 (Šāleḥyār, 1972, 135), and 1897 (Jamšidi, 1988, 48). On account of these conflicting figures, he has been dubbed as “a man without a birthday” (Bāstāni Pārizi, 1987, 807).

Mansuri was born into a lower middle class family. His father was a civil servant, with no literary sensibilities. His relatives on his mother side were religious scholars. He had two brothers and one sister. His younger brother, Raži-Allāh Ḥakim-Elāhi, was allegedly arrested together with other members of “The Group of Fifty-Three “ (Goruh-e panjāh o se nafar), a group of left-leaning political activists, led by [Taqi Arāni](#), who were charged with propagation of Marxist ideology and jailed in 1937. Mansuri dedicated many of his books to the memory of Raži-Allāh, who died at the age of 21 (Emāmi, 1988, 54).

Mansuri learnt French at the [Alliance Française](#) of Kurdistan in Sanandaj, run by French missionaries, and later by taking private lessons from a physician in [Kermānšāh](#). However, after his father’s death he had to give up his formal education to support his family. After taking up various jobs, such as typesetting, he began to work as a translator with the newspaper *Kušeš*, founded by Šokr-al-Allāh Šafavi in Tehran. This proved to be a lifelong cooperation. He went through all stages of journalism, from parliamentary,



judicial, and political reporting to writing the journal's editorial articles. His main task, however, remained the translating of serial stories.

In 1927, while still with *Kušeš*, he began working for the newly established *Eṭṭelā'āt*, the oldest running Tehran afternoon daily newspaper, founded in 1923 by 'Abbās Mas'udi (1901-1974). He also translated a few books that were serialized in the widely circulated *Kayhan*, a daily newspaper founded by 'Abd-al-Raḥmān Farāmarzi in May 1942.

His journalistic and literary career could be divided into three interrelated periods. Up to 1941, he translated mostly romantic love stories, along with fast-moving thrillers of murder, intrigue, blackmail, and espionage by Agatha Christie (1890-1976) and James Hadley Chase (1906-1985). They were serialized in *Kušeš* from 1927 onwards. His translations were instrumental in introducing many Western literary figures to the Iranian public, notable among them André Maurois (1885-1967), and Stefan Zweig (1881-1942). *Zanbur-e 'asal*, his highly popular translation of *The Life of the Bee*, by Maurice Maeterlinck (1862-1949), the Belgian playwright, poet, and essayist, and Nobel laureate in literature in 1911, was first serialized in *Kušeš* in 1929 and then published as a book. It went through over thirty reprints in less than a decade, and made Maeterlinck a widely read author in Persian translation.

Throughout the second period of his career, beginning with the occupation of Iran in 1941 by the Allied Forces, and the subsequent abdication of Reza Shah, and ending with the overthrow of Mohammad Mosaddeq's government in 1953 (see [COUP D'ETAT OF 1332 Š./1953](#)), he mainly translated and authored politically charged books and articles. Under pseudonyms he wrote political commentaries for *Irān-e mā*, an influential liberal paper with a nationalistic orientation, founded by Jahāngir Tafazzoli (1914-1990) in Tehran in 1943 (Jamšidi, 1998, 120). In the 1950s, his translation of Winston Churchill's six-volume account of the Second World War was first serialized and then published as a book in 1965 to great success.

The CIA-assisted 1953 coup was a watershed in Iran's history. The state censorship tightened its grip on the press, and serialized stories replaced heated political debates. Mansuri produced many of his controversial works, mostly historical or religious, in this period (Jamšidi, 1988, 38). In a sense, he no longer translated during this period. Rather, drawing from an encyclopedic knowledge of historical, geographical, and religious events and issues, he produced, or in his own words 'adapted' two or three serials for each issue of



Kvādanihā, the twice-weekly journal founded by ‘Ali-Aṣḡar Amirāni in 1941 (Afšār, 2003, 589). He sprinkled his works with detailed descriptions of scenes, characters, and events. “He was more an author than a translator (Behzādi, 1998, 130-31); he “read a book and, in his own words, re-composed it to the taste of Persian readers” (Emāmi, 1988, 76); and he imagined names for imaginary writers who were, “like the narratives themselves, the figments of his rich imagination” (Milani, 2008, II, 874). He once expanded an article of 24 pages into a book of 620 pages. It was first serialized in *Sepid o siāh* and later published as *Maḡz-e motafakker-e jahān-e Šī‘a* (The think tank of the Shiite world, 1975). He also rewrote a work of forty pages into a serial story spanning more than fifty issues of the weekly *sepid-o-siāh* (Behzādi, 1988, 134).

Mansuri’s translations caused a great stir and invoked harsh criticism. They were decried as “figments of his own imagination” (Fulādvand, 1978, 79) and as “the rewriting of a book, of which he has only read one page” (Minovi, 1973, 17). Not all commentators, however, concurred with such harsh statements. He was praised for writing in a simple, unadorned, correct, and fluent language (Sayyār, 1987, 667) and for rewarding two or three generations of young readers with the pleasure of reading, “by no means a mean achievement” (Emāmi, 1987, 62). According to a noted historian, “Mansuri is not a historian. He writes historical stories ... He is certainly the most popular Iranian writer since the emergence of the press in Iran” (Bāstāni Pārizi, p. 55). As held by another critic, “Mansuri’s novels are not read exclusively by housewives and retired old men. Many doctors, engineers, and educated people are among his fans ... Forget about Mansuri the translator, just raise your hat to Mansuri the writer” (Emāmi, 1977, pp. 59-60).

Mansuri’s writings, in particular his historical novels, enjoyed a wide readership, selling for more than a decade (1978-88) in huge numbers, rivaled by only a few, in Tehran and other cities (Jamšidi, p. 19; Emāmi, 1977, p. 60; Behzādi, 1998, 126). Most noted among his books are: *Sinuha, pezešk-e maḡsuṣ-e Fer‘own* (Sinuheh, the Pharaoh’s personal physician 1985), *Ġazāli dar Baḡdād* (Ghazali in Baghdad, 1984), *Maḡbus-e Saint Helen* (The prisoner of St. Helena, 1984), *Ķodāvand-e ‘elm o šamšir* (The god of knowledge and the sword, 1969), *Kvja-ye tājdār* (The crowned eunuch, 1968), *Šāh-jang-e Iraniān dar Čālderān* (The decisive battle of the Iranians at Chalderan, 1976), *‘Ayeša ba’d az Payḡambar* (Ayesha after the Prophet, 1979), *Sarzamin-e jāvid* (The eternal land, 1990) and *Delāvarān-e gomnām-e Irān* (Unsung heroes of Iran, 1984). To these should be added the popular stories he serialized in the 1950s in *Sepid-o-*



siāh, such as *ʿOššāq-e nāmdār* (Famous lovers) and *Bozorgtarin jahāngardi-e bašar: zendegi-e māgžellān, daryānavard-e Porteqāli* (Man's greatest world exploration: the life of Magellan, the Portuguese sailor).

Under the drastically changed conditions of the Iran of the 1980s, the demand for biographies of historical figures, as well as historical novels, experienced an increase, on a scale unprecedented for several decades. Mansuri's books satisfied this nostalgic demand and sold the most. "With a genius peculiar to him, he leads the disorientated readers to a neverland, reviving what has been suppressed by the Revolution" (Barāhani, 1985, 99). According to Karim Emāmi, "His works, completed or otherwise, were published as hardcover, gilt-titled books after the Islamic Revolution. They amused readers throughout the long nights of horror of the [Iran-Iraq War](#)" (Emāmi, 2001, 48).

The supposed number of works that he had either 'adapted,' or translated from English or French, range from 1,400 (Şāleḥyār, 1972, 135) to 130 titles (Afšār, 2003, 590). As held by a critic, out of more than 450 of his detective stories that were serialized in *Kušeš*, only 64 were published as pocket-sized popular books (Jamšidi, 1988, 83).

Mansuri, according to himself, was "a scribe under contract" (Behzādi, 1998, 123) and saw it as his business to keep the readers engaged and the editors satisfied. In a series of articles entitled *Donyā-ye nāšenāka-ye seḥr-o-jādu* (The unchartered world of sorcery and magic), published in *Sepid-o-siāh* in 1971, he pleased many readers by assuming the mantle of a clairvoyant fortune-teller (Jamšidi, p.62). According to Hušang Etteḥād, he also functioned as a ghostwriter in several cases and had been hired to compose dissertations in medicine, law, and literature for thirteen graduate students (Etteḥād, p. 140; Jamšidi, p. 94). Despite the long years of hard work, however, he only managed to eke out a modest livelihood.

Mansuri "was a stern, dour, introvert person, who would not let anyone into the sanctity of his personal life" (Behzādi, 1998, 118). He had no close friends, though he had talked of his friendship with [Sadeq Hedayat](#) and Nima Yushij (Jamšidi, p. 103).

Mansuri was Iran's first champion in lightweight boxing. He married late and had two children: a daughter Homā and a son Siāmak. In 1969, the Iranian Writers and Reporters Syndicate held a ceremony in his honor, in which the Syndicate's lecture hall was renamed as Zabihollah Mansuri Lecture Hall



(Jamšidi, 1988, 81).

In frail health towards the end of his life, Mansuri found the task of writing increasingly difficult, and in order to fulfill his commitments he had to dictate his stories to his daughter (Jamšidi, 1988, 38). He died on 8 June 1986 at Šari'ati Hospital in Tehran.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Iraj Afšār, *Nādera-kārān* (The notables), ed., Maḥmud Nikuya, Tehran, 2003.

Ja'far Āqāyāni Čavoši, "Kārgāh-e ketābsāzi-e Maṣūri," *Našr-e dāneš*, April/May, 1988, pp. 76-79.

Rezā Barāhani: *Kimyā va kāk* (Elixir and earth), Tehran, 1985.

Moḥammad Ebrāhim Bāstāni Pārizi, "Dar yād-e Zabiḥ-Allāh Maṣūri," *Āyanda*, February/ March 1987, pp. 804-8.

'Ali Behzādi, "Zabiḥ-Allāh Maṣūri āntowr ke man šenāktam," in Esmā'il Jamšidi, *Didār ba Zabiḥ-Allāh Maṣūri*, Tehran, 1998, pp. 115-56.

Karim Emāmi, "Padida-i be nām-e Zabiḥ-Allāh Maṣūri-e motarjem," *Našr-e dāneš*, February/March 1988, pp. 52-61.

Idem, "Bāz ham darbāra-ye Zabiḥ-Allāh Maṣūri," *Našr-e dāneš*, April/May, 1988, p. 76.

Idem, "Naqš-e nāšērān dar oft-o-kiz-e tarjoma-ye adabi," in *Majmu'a-ye maqālāt-e noḳostin hamāyeš-e tarjoma-ye adabi dar Iran*, (Collection of essays presented at the first seminar on the translation of literary works), ed., 'Ali Kazā'ifar, Mašhad, 2000, pp. 45-56.

Hušang Etteḥād, *Pažuhešgarān-e mo'ašer-e Irān VIII*, Tehran, 2003, pp. 134-78.

Moḥammad-Mehdi Fulādvand, "Mas'ala-ye dorost-nevisi va kiānat dar tarjoma," *Našr-e Dāneš*, April 1978 (no. 3), p. 79.



Esmā'īl Jamšīdi, *Didār bā Zabīḥ-Allāh Maṣūri* (An encounter with Zabihollah Mansuri), Tehran, 1988.

Abbas Milani, *The Eminent Persians: The Men and Women Who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979*, Syracuse, N.Y., 2008.

Mojtabā Minovi, "Mojtabā Minovi: paḏuhešgar-e sotihanda," *Ketāb-e emruz*, Autumn, 1973, p. 17.

Ġolām-Ḥosayn Šāleḫyār, *Čehra-y maṭbuā't-e mo'āšer*, Tehran, 1972.

Ġolām-'Āli Sayyār, "Darbāra-ye Zabīḥ-Allāh Maṣūri," *Āyanda*, December, 1986-January 1987, pp. 666-68.