



MASRUR, HOSAYN

MASRUR, Hosayn (pen name of Ḥosayn Soḳanyār; b. Kupā, a village in southeast of the Isfahan Province, 1890; d. Tehran, 1968), 20th century novelist, poet, and literary scholar.

Masrur's father was a merchant and his mother came from a clerical family. He received his elementary education in Kupā and later in Isfahan, where his family had moved when he was eight years old. He continued his studies in Islamic jurisprudence, as well as Persian and Arabic literature, and learnt English at the Vakil-al-Dawla School, which was founded by the Armenian community of Isfahan. Later he studied French and Hebrew in Kāšān, under the tutelage of a Jewish rabbi. In 1932, along with Moḥammad Taqī Bahār (Malek-al-Šo'arā, 1886-1951), renowned poet and literary scholar, and Aḥmad Kasravi (1890-1946), the historian noted for his outspoken views on cultural and religious issues, he studied Middle Persian with Ernst Hertzfeld (1879-1948), the German scholar and archeologist who was in Iran for archeological research and fieldwork (Eḥtešāmi, p. 37).

In 1908, Masrur went to Mašhad and stayed there for eighteen months, where he studied Islamic philosophy and made the acquaintance of such political figures as Moḥammad Amin Rasulzāda (Baku 1884-Ankara 1945), the political activist of the early decades of the 20th century, and the manager and main contributor to the daily *Iran-e now* (New Iran), organ of the Democratic Party, which was published in Tehran from 1909 to 1919 (Eḥtešāmi, p. 38). Back in Tehran, he took some time to complete his education before returning to Isfahan to help his father who was engaged in business and trading. In 1922 he



married but did not have any children. He returned to Tehran in the same year.

A year later, he was employed by the Ministry of Education to compile and publish a Persian dictionary. The project, however, did not receive funding and never materialized (Eḥtešāmi, p. 37). Subsequently Masrur was appointed to a number of clerical and instructional positions in the Ministry of Education and for more than 36 years taught Persian literature and history at Dār-al-Fonun, the Teachers Training College (Dāneš-sarā-ye ‘āli), and the Military College (Dāneškada-ye afsari). Many of his students went on to become distinguished figures in the fields of science, literature and politics (Dorudiān, 1984, p. 182). His circle of friends in Tehran included such eminent scholars as Moḥammad Taqī Bahār, Aḥmad Kasravi, Ḡolām-Rezā Rašid Yāsemi (1894-1951), Mojtabā Minovi (1903-1976) and Sa‘id Nafisi (1895-1966), among others. In 1923 he joined the Iran Literary Circle (Anjoman-e Adabi-e Irān), a leading advocate of Persian classical literature in the Rezā Shah Pahlavi era (r. 1925-1941), and was appointed to its directorial board in 1924.

Masrur launched his literary career at early adolescence by writing poetry. The poems he composed at the age of fifteen came to the notice of his school principal, who introduced him to the Kamāl Literary Circle (Anjoman-e Adabi-e Kamāl; Eḥtešāmi, p. 38), where Masrur enjoyed the praise of a number of poets, such as Dehqān Sāmāni, and the support of Solaymān Khan Ḳalaf Širāzi, the governor of Isfahan and an instrumental figure in founding and supporting the Circle, who had also encouraged Dehqān Sāmāni to versify the *One Thousand and One Nights*.

Soon, Masrur rose to prominence as a talented poet. In 1933 he earned first place in a poetry competition organized by Iran Literary Circle (Anjoman-e adabi-e Iran) in celebration of the discovery of the gold and silver tablets in the foundation corners of the Āpādānā Palace in Persepolis. His poem “Arāmgāh-e Ferdowsi,” (Ferdowsi mausoleum) also came first in a poetry competition held for the official celebration of Ferdowsi’s millenary in 1934 (Borqa‘i, 1994, vol. 5, p. 3277). One of his poems, entitled “Marg-e paranda” (Death of the bird), also won a poetry competition conducted by the Persian Program of the World Service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC; Siāsi, 1969, p. 16). His eloquent qasidas (*qaṣida*), endowed with the lofty diction of the Ḳorāsāni and the lyrical tone of the ‘Erāqi styles, received critical notice (Dorudiān, 1984, p. 182). His mastery in composing mathnawis (*matnawi*) in the *motaqāreb* meter, are praised by Moḥammad-Taqī Bahār, who described



his poem as “unparalleled among contemporary poets.” (Eḥtešāmi, p. 38).

Masrur’s poems are confined within the rules of Persian classical prosody. Rich in imagery and language, they are imbued with nationalistic sentiments and emotional overtones. “Honar-nāma,” one of his most noted poems, is in celebration of Iran’s national heritage and historical monuments. In a handful of cases that he ventures outside traditional norms he fails to create innovative imageries (Dorudiān, 1984, p. 183). Of his over 6,000 poems (Kalkāli, 1954, p. 363), some were published in cultural and literary journals of the period, including Armaḡān, a monthly magazine founded in 1919 by Ḥasan Vaḥid Dastagerdi (Masrur, p. 1079). A collection of his poems entitled *Rāz-e elhām* (The secret of inspiration) was published in 1959. A selection from the collection’s poems was also published in *Yādḡār-e Soḡanyār* (1968). Vali-Allāh Dorudiān has published another selection of his poems in a collection entitled *Marg-e paranda* (2005).

As a participant in the period’s nationalistic discourse, which was expressed in the glorification of pre-Islamic Persia and the denunciation of the Arab invasion, and even appeared in the works of writers such as Šādeq Hedāyat (1903-1951) and Bozorg ‘Alavi (1904-1997; Meskub, pp. 25-31), Masrur has composed poems in praise of Zoroaster and ancient Persian religious festivals (Siāsi, 1969, p. 26). There are verses in his divan (*divān*) in which he denounces the invasion of Bušehr by the British forces in World War I, and condemns the presence of the Russian army in Azarbaijan in World War II, as well as the revolt of Ja‘far Pišavari, the founder of the separatist Democratic Party of Azarbaijan (Ferqa-ye demokrāt-e Ādarbāijān). He was also a strong advocate of a life of action and hard work as opposed to that of the mystic mendicant and recluse.

Masrur’s popular songs and satirical verses were mostly published in *Gol-e zard*, a literary journal that appeared in 1917 (Etteḡād, p. 289). Through Forṣat-al-Dawla Širāzi (1854-1920), the Persian poet and scholar, he became familiarized with the traditional system in Persian music. Some of his songs (*taṣnif*) were performed by ‘Ali Akbar Šahnāzi (Eḥtešāmi, p. 39).

For three decades he wrote, or translated from the Egyptian press, articles on literature, language, and history, as well as a few stories that were published in the journals of the period, such as *Setāra-ye Irān* (Eḥtešāmi, p. 38). These works were never published separately. Masrur was also interested in folk tales, popular language, and local dialects and proverbs. His writings, that he



had arranged and classified in the three sections of “Amṭāl-e sa’era,” “loḡāt,” and “farhang-e zabān” (Etteḥād, p. 289), were never published. Masrur’s main claim to fame, however, rests on his historical novels, which he began to write as a result of Malek-al-Šoa‘arā Bahār’s encouragement (Masrur, p. 1079), who later published Masrur’s first piece of historical fiction, entitled “Maḥmud-e Afḡān dar rāh-e Eṣfahān” (Mahmud the Afghan on his way to Isfahan), in 1922 in *Now-bahār*, a periodical published by Bahār (Eḥtešāmi, p. 38).

The most noted of Masrus’s historical novels, however, is *Dah nafar qezelbāš* (The ten kizilbash), which first appeared in installments from 1948 onwards in the newspaper *Eṭṭelā‘āt*, the Tehran afternoon daily newspaper, published by ‘Abbās Mas‘udi. The novel was published in 1956 in five volumes and 1,500 pages. The story is modeled after ancient Persian tales and begins when the Safavid Shah Tahmāsp (r. 1534-1576), learns that his harem in Torbat-e Ḥeydariya, a city in Ḳorāsān, has been surrounded by anti-Shi‘ite Uzbeks. He would rather murder his wives than leaving them in the hands of the Uzbeks. He orders his horsemen to ride day and night to Torbat-e Ḥeydariya, and convey the king’s order to the leader of his military guards (qarāvōlān) to execute all the members of the king’s harem. Eighteen Qezelbāš volunteer for the task and ten of them are able to successfully break through the siege. A man named Eskandar is the first among them, but before the Ṭahmāsp’s order can be carried out, the enemy retreats. Eskandar, who has fallen in love with Ḥuri, one of the girls in the harem, like the heroes of many Persian folk and courtly tales, sets off on a long series of battles against the foe, brushes aside the dangers, and eventually reaches her beloved and assumes power and success.

The second volume of the novel is set during the Iran-Ottoman wars in the 17th century, and revolves around the daring feats of a warrior called Ommat Beg, while in the third volume the pre-Islamic glories of Persia are highlighted to dramatize the coming to throne of Shah ‘Abbās I (r. 1576-1629) and his efforts to rebuild the country and strengthen and invigorate the state. The nationalistic overtone of the volume reduces some of its chapters to a historical commentary. The Safavid kings’ dream of ruling a unified country, their maritime wars against the Portuguese, their wars with the Uzbeks, their liberation of Tabriz from the Ottoman rule, and their establishment of Isfahan as the nation’s capital, are all depicted in the fourth and fifth volumes of the novel. The book was reprinted in Tehran in 2005.

The publication of the novel attracted a wide readership and caused *Eṭṭelā‘āt*



to gain a wider circulation. It was praised as the best historical novel in Persian language (Kalkāli, 1954, p. 362), and as a testament to Masrur's prowess and vision (Afšār, p. 232). As commented by a critic of the next generation, the novel benefits from the author's keen awareness of the historical events that he attempts to depict, his skillful portrayal of historical and fictional characters, and his studied adaptation of the language of the period (Sepānlu, pp. 136-7). It should be noted, however, that none of the succeeding volumes of the novel matched the popularity of the first.

Pursuing the ultimate goal of writing the Safavid dynastic history, a goal he failed to achieve, Masrur, like a diligent scholar, spared little time to familiarize himself with Iran's socio-political history under the Safavids. He is distinguished amongst the first generation of Iran's social novelists by his studied description of religious and administrative institutions, his detailed depiction of social customs and beliefs, and his familiarity with the lifestyle and language of the people of the period (Ġolām, 2002, pp. 208-10). A pro-monarchy by upbringing and education (Siāsi, 1969, p. 28), he succeeded to sustain a balance between the historical concerns of the period, on the one hand, and the aesthetic imperatives of a literary work, on the other (Mir'ābedini, pp. 136-7; Ġolām, 2002, pp. 503-4).

From 1931 onwards, Masrur devoted most of his time to writing historical fictions and plays and producing radio programs, such as "Šahr-e soḵan," (The city of words) and "Irān dar āyena-ye zamān," (Iran in the mirror of time), for the Ministry of Information (Etteḥād, p. 287). A selection of his short stories were published in an undated collection, entitled *Ney-zan-e biābān* (The reed player of deserts). His other novel, *Qarrān* (1953), a story in seven chapters and 168 pages, revolves around the heroic life of Loṭf-'Ali Khan Zand (d. 1794), the last ruler of the Zand Dynasty, his taking refuge in Kermān, and his being murdered by Āqā Moḥammad Khan Qajar (r. 1794-1797), the founder of the Qajar Dynasty (1794-1925). *Qarrān*, like his other historical novels, benefits from Masrur's familiarity with the actual events, customs, costumes, and the language of the period. His mastery in capturing the breadth of the social and political events of the period and incorporating them into the imaginary account of the different stages of Loṭf-'Ali Khan Zand's life and his tragic death, along with his skillful adoption of a simple and yet an entertaining language, colored with nationalistic sentiments, led a literary critic to consider the novel as a turning point in the development of historical novels in contemporary Iran (Ġolām, 2002, p. 209). Masrur died of cancer in 1968 and was buried in



the Zāhir al-Dawla Cemetery at Šemirān, north of Tehran (Borqa'ī, 1994, vol. 5, p. 3278).

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