



MAS'UD, MOHAMMAD

MAS'UD, Mohammad (Moḥammad Mas'ud, b. Qom 1901; d. Tehran, 11 February 1948) novelist and editor of the controversial and highly popular newspaper *Mard-e emruz* (1942-1948).

Mohammad Mas'ud was born to a poor religious family, and was brought up, in his own words, in “the midst of sanctity and piety.” (*Bahār-e 'omr*, 1945, p. 109) His great grandfather Mollā 'Abd-Allāh and his grandfather Mollā Moḥammad-Taqi had been among Qom's prominent clergies.

Following his primary education, Mas'ud attended a seminary in Qom for a couple of years and got involved in the practice of alchemy and witchcraft to make a living. He had found “magic spells and alchemical formulae,” in the books left by his grandfather (*Golhā'i ke dar jahannam miruyand*, p. 68). However, it did not take long for him to come across the Persian translation of European novels, which were in vogue at the time. Most notable among them, as held by Mas'ud himself, were *Binavāyān* (Tehran, 1928-31), Ḥosayn-Qoli Most'ān's (1904-1983) popular translation of Victor Hugo's *Les misérable*, and *Sargodāšt-e Hāji Bābā-ye Eṣfahāni* (see [HAJJI BABA OF ISPAHAN](#)), [Mirzā Ḥabib Eṣfahāni](#)'s (1835-1893) imaginative rendering of James Morier's (1782-1849) picaresque novel, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isfahan* (3 vols., London, 1824), which appeared in print in Persian in 1905 with many omissions, as well as many passages and phrases added by Mirza Ḥabib to satisfy the Persian palate. These novels, along with Zayn al-Ābedin Marāḡa'i's (1837-1910) *Sīāḡat-nāma-ye Ebrāhim Beg yā balā-ye ta'aṣṣob-e u* (The travel diaries of Ebrahim Beg, or the pitfalls of his patriotism; Cairo, 1895), and 'Ali Akbar



Dehḵodā's (1879-1956) satirical articles and biting social critiques in *Şur-e Esrāfil* "broadened [his] horizon." (*Golhā'i ke dar jahannam miruyand*, pp. 99-100) He soon developed a critical approach toward religion and superstitious beliefs (*ibid*, pp. 89,108), dropped out of the seminary and left for Tehran to find a job.

In his autobiographical novel, *Bahār-e 'omr* (The bloom of life, Tehran, 1945), an early instance of Persian novel in which the life of a seminarian is recounted, Mas'ud recalls the financial hardships of his early childhood, and his sensitivity to the sufferings of the poor and the weak, struggling with destitute and the calamity of famine and cholera, which swept the country after the First World War (Šifta, 1984, p. 115). The book unfolds with a descriptive chapter on the miseries Iran has suffered in the past, and proceeds with an impressive account of the author's childhood and adolescence, one of a ragtag group of children roaming about Qom, and hanging out in the city's graveyards, where a constant influx of the deceased, was punctuated with mourning rituals and passion plays. His lifelong concern to escape poverty and its humiliations, even when he had accumulated sufficient wealth, and his disapproval of politicians and the rich who, as he believed, were responsible for the poverty of the majority of people, first emerged in his novels and later in the vehement editorials he published in *Mard-e emruz*.

Mas'ud's *Bahār-e 'omr*, also sheds a light on his initial involvement with writing and journalism. In his account, a young seminarian called Abu-Ṭāleb, deranged by love, kills a boy called 'Ali, and the boy's father kills him in retaliation. Mas'ud, at the request of the chief of the police department, writes a brief account of the murder, and its reception turns out to mark his entry into the world of journalism. At seventeen, with *Şur-e Esrāfil* in mind as an inspiring example, he transcribed fifty copies of a four-page paper entitled *Şafaq*, in which freedom, equality, constitutional government, and human rights, highly in vogue on those days, occupied the center (*Bahār-e 'omr*, 1945, pp. 107,18).

Mas'ud was almost twenty when accompanied Loṭf-Allāh Taraqqi, the journalist and the father of the noted novelist Goli Taraqqi, on his trip to Tehran. Having a fine handwriting and showing a flair for painting, he embarked on a career in Eqbāl Bookstore, where he worked as an illustrator under the pseudonym of Moḥammad Helāl. Later on, under the pseudonym of Moḥammad Kimiāgar, he took a variety of jobs, including typesetting in a publishing house.



After graduating from high school, he got a teaching position for two years in an elementary school (Kamshad, p. 66; Sepānlu, 1984, p. 2). Obsessed as he was with getting rich, however, and supported by a merchant friend, he soon cofounded, with the poet Majd-al-Din Mirfakrā'i (also known as [Golčīn Gilāni](#)), a brokerage concern, called Kār (Šifta, 1984, p. 357). During these years of aimless meandering and frequent unemployment, Mas'ud spent much time reading fiction, in particular the novels and short stories of [Mohammad 'Ali Jamalzadeh](#) and [Sadeq Hedayat](#). He also wrote many articles, under the pseudonym of M. M. Dehāti, for different newspapers, including *Taraqqi*, *Eṭṭelā'āt*, and *Šafaq-e sorḵ* (Šifta, 1984, p. 377). He delineates this phase of his life in his trilogy *Tafriḥāt-e šab* (Nocturnal pleasures, 1932), *Dar talāš-e ma'āš* (Struggling to earn a living, 1933), and *Ašraf-e maḵluqāt* (The noblest of creatures, 1934), "in a language that sometimes sounds like the cries of a man under torture." (Kamshad, p. 66) The stories, as "severe indictments of urban aimlessness and decadence," (Hillmann, 1988, p. 295), revolve around the life of a number of school dropouts, who, with no hope, no ambition, and no moral and ethical consideration, spend their nights wandering from one bar to another, getting drunk, looking for women, and ending up in brothels. *Tafriḥāt-e šab*, arguably the best received of the trilogy, by "openly exposing the frustrations of the educated classes and urban civil servants with a mixture of humor and tragedy," (Yarshater, 1988, p. 34), made a great stir, appearing to some as the manual of corruption and spiteful vulgarity, and to others as the skillful depiction of the worst ills of society, heralding a literary renaissance (Jamalzadeh, p. 30). Jamalzadeh, who had read the novel while in Europe and was fascinated by the talent and biting language of the young author, exercised his influence on his friends, 'Ali 'Akbar Dāvar (1885-1937), the then minister of finance, and 'Ali Ašgar Ḥekmat (1893-1980), the then minister of education, to secure Mas'ud a government scholarship to study journalism in Europe (Kātuziān, 2003, p. 28; Šifta, 1984, p. 8).

In 1935 Mas'ud went first to Paris and then to Brussels, where he was admitted to Brussels College of Journalism, graduating with a score of 60 out of 100 on July 1st, 1938. At the same time, he contributed articles to the journal *La Gazette* in Brussels. Mas'ud's stay in Europe provided him with an opportunity to familiarize himself with the works of such French novelists as Emil Zola (1840-1902) and Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893; Šifta, 1984, p. 32). He was also introduced to Western political philosophy and the ideas of such influential Enlightenment thinkers as John Locke (1632-1704), and Adam Smith (1723-1790), as well as Karl Marx (1818-1883), and his *Das Kapital* (Šāyḡān,



2001, p. 15). One of his articles in *La Gazette* entitled “Communism: the path to individualism” proved to be costly; infuriating Reza Shah’s secret police to summon him back to Iran (Abu’l-Ḥasani, p. 134). It should be noted, however, that Mas’ud remained a fierce opponent of the USSR and the Tudeh Party (see [COMMUNISM](#) ii-iii) throughout his journalistic career.

Mas’ud’s recollection of his acquaintance and relationship in Belgium with a girl named Ginette, whom he promised to marry, has appeared in his disturbing autobiographical novel *Golhā’i ke dar jahannam miruyand* (The flowers that grow in hell, Tehran, 1943). It revolves around the life of an Iranian student, who, upon the completion of his studies in Europe, returns to Iran in the hope of settling down and bringing home the girl he has fallen in love with and has left behind. “Home,” however, as he describes it in a letter to the girl, explaining why he cannot marry her, offers nothing but despair, frustration, and difficulties, and has little to differentiate it from “hell”. Disappointed by her repeated attempts to save the relationship, Ginette committed suicide in Brussels in May 1922 (Šifta, 1984, p. 144). Mas’ud gave her name to his only daughter of a temporary marriage, who left Iran for Paris after Mas’ud’s assassination (Šāyḡān, 2001, p. 13).

Mas’ud returned to Iran via USSR in 1939, only to face the tightened grip of state censorship on his journalistic agenda. His article in *La Gazette* had left him with little chance to obtain the license required for publishing a newspaper. Esmā’il Merāt, who had succeeded ‘Ali Aṣḡar Ḥekmat as the minister of education, went so far as to ban the publication of his articles in other newspapers as well. Eventually, he was offered a position in the Office of Publications (Edāra-ye enṭebā’āt), whose responsibilities included the censoring of the press, among others. Seeing no chance to continue his journalistic career, and unwilling to be implicated in the censorship of the press, he turned down the offer. Instead, with two of his friends, he set up a small import-export business, called Moḥammad Mas’ud Co. (Šifta, 1984, pp. 10-11).

The occupation of Iran by the Allied forces and the fall of Reza Shah in 1941 allowed Iran to experience an unprecedented freedom of expression that brought with it a sudden surge of political parties and newspapers, appearing one after another. Mas’ud, as a tribute to the memory of ‘Ali Akbar Dāvar, who had facilitated his trip to Europe to continue his studies, applied for the title of Dāvar’s former newspaper *Mard-e āzād* (The free man), a daily newspaper published in Tehran from 29 January to 14 November 1923. Being denied the



same title he opted for *Mard-e emruz*, instead (Šifta, 1984, p. 13).

Mard-e emruz, with its poignant and rather obscene editorials earned Mas'ud the admiration of many, and the hostility of many more (Mošfeq Kāzemi, p. 91; Behzādi, p. 680). In Mas'ud's treatment of Persian history, the two chapters of tyranny and anarchy had invariably followed one another, turning the country into the "terrestrial paradise of burglars and criminals," (The flowers that grow in hell, p. 28), or rather, all those he fought so hard to unmask both in his editorials and the letters he presumably received from his readers: the royal court; the government; the USSR and Tudeh Party.

Mas'ud's political vocabulary, alien as it was to compromise and tolerance, proved particularly short in dealing with Aḥmad Qavām's (Qavām-al-Saltāna, 1873-1955), pragmatic style of politics in the formation of a coalition cabinet, handling of the Soviet oil deal and the suppression of the autonomous government in Azarbaijan. He published over twenty-eight articles against Qavām, whom he addressed as "champion of idiocy", "lunatic", and "rotten pumpkin". To earn Mas'ud's silence, Qavām, who was muddling through one crisis after another in those days, offered him a monthly contribution of twenty thousand rials or a weekly purchase of one thousand copies of *Mard-e emruz*. Mas'ud turned down the offer (Šifta, 1984, p. 378). On August 17, 1947, when the Soviet oil deal faced ratification in the parliament, Mas'ud published a damning editorial in *Mard-e emruz*, and pledged to pay a sum of one million rials "to any person or his beneficiary" who would assassinate *Qavām* while still in office (Āqeli, 1992, 1, pp. 406-08); an unprecedented and a blatant instance of provocative journalism which bears more the mark of a personal grudge than a studied social conviction (Qā'ed, 1984, pp. 301-02). Moḥammad Mošaddeq (1882-1966), however, was among few politicians who won Mas'ud's praise as "the real representative of the nation" (*Mard-e emruz*, 4 April 1944).

Mas'ud's unrelenting attacks on the establishment and the royal court cost him frequent interrogations and repeated suspension of his journal. It should be noted, however, that the government was not all against the publication of *Mard-e emruz* (Šifta, 1984, p. 153), and even took advantage of Mas'ud's journalistic appeal and bold language to suppress its opponents.

To some of his fans, Mas'ud's undaunted condemnation of usurpers of wealth and power was part of a grand design to save Iran from poverty and its dehumanizing effects. It was in line with this cause, that Mas'ud founded the



Negative Resistance Organization in 1947. The mission of the Organization, later known as the National Resistance, was to crackdown the criminals and traitors (Šāyḡān, 2001, p. 127). According to Ḥosayn Fāṭemi (1917-1954), whose articles, while he was in Europe, were featured in *Mard-e emruz*, Mas'ud was the voice of those whom he had suffered with; the poor, the underprivileged, and the unemployed (Šifta, 1984, p. 18). It is interesting to note that Fāṭemi narrowly escaped an attempt on his life carried out by a member of the [Fedā'iān-e Eslām](#), while delivering a memorial speech at Mas'ud's tomb on the fourth anniversary of his assassination in 1947 (see below).

To his detractors, on the other hand, Mas'ud was a dangerous demagogue who, animated by sex and money throughout his life, blackmailed the rich and high-ranking officials to enrich himself. Jamalzadeh, whose fascination with Mas'ud's literary talent changed the course of his life, later turned into a bitter critic of his journalistic agenda. "He was one of the lowest rascals in the world... unrivaled in mendacity, treachery, and wangling." (Jamalzadeh, p. 134)

On Thursday evening, February 11, 1948, while sitting in his car in front of Maḏāheri Publishing House on Ekbātān Avenue in Tehran, Mas'ud was fatally shot in the head. Several people were arrested but released shortly after, and the murderer was not to be found for many years to come. His death, imitating his life and career, was and continued to be for several decades, the subject of many conflicting and unsubstantiated accounts, mostly based on mere speculation. He was buried in Ḥāẓir-al-Dowla Cemetery, and more than two hundred thousand people attended his memorial service. Several journalists paid homage to him as an uncompromising critic of power and wealth and a martyred colleague who sacrificed his life for the freedom of press (Šifta, 1984, pp. 204-05).

The name of many institutions and public figures, whom he had harshly and invariably criticized for many years, were woven into the complex narrative of his assassination: the court; the Russians; the British; the Zionists; the Tudeh Party; and Aḥmad Qavām, his chief nemesis. It was Fereydun Kešāvarz, however, who eventually revealed the details of an intricate plot, masterminded by 'Abd-al-Šamad Kāmbakš and Nur-al-Din Kiānuri, and conducted by Kōsrow Ruzbeh, which led to Mas'ud's assassination (Kešāvarz, pp. 45-52).

Ruzbeh, arguably the most controversial member of the Tudeh Party's military



wing, was the head of an assassination team consisting of Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Abbāsi and Ḥesām Lankarāni, the brother of Ḥosayn Lankarāni, an influential clergy who represented Ardabil in the 14th Parliament. Ḥesām Lankarāni's membership in the team, added the names of the radical religious groups to the long list of those suspected to be involved in Mas'ud's assassination (Šifta, 1984, p. 257). Although the Lankarāni brothers had often supported Mas'ud whenever he was in danger, their close ties with Tudeh Party, however, had denied them his trust (ibid, pp. 117-19). Lankarāni brothers were arrested and were in detention for a short while, after Mas'ud's assassination. Ruzbeh was captured after a shootout in July 1957, and executed on 11 May 1958. He soon developed into the symbol of uncompromising opposition, heroic resistance, and ultimate self-sacrifice. The Tudeh Party posthumously elevated him to the central committee and made him into an icon equal to [Taqi Arāni](#) (1902-1940), the intellectual initiator of the communism in Iran. [Siyāvaš Kasrā'i](#) (1926-1996), noted Marxist poet and political activist, dedicated his most famous collection of poetry, *Āraš-e kamāngir* (Arash the Archer, 1958; See [ĀRAŠ ii](#)), to his memory. Aḥmad Šāmlu composed a couplet in praise of him. It is interesting to note, however, that after the publication of Ruzbeh's confessions, Šāmlu recanted his dedication.

Ruzbeh, according to his confessions in the court, had participated in several assassinations. One of these being of Ḥesām Lankarāni, suspected of selling information to the police after 1953 coup, and another the one of Mohammad Mas'ud, “known for his fearless and unrelenting attacks on the Tudeh Party and the royal court, particularly the Shah's sister, Princess Ashraf.” (Milani, II, p. 278) By orchestrating a concert of whispers around the murder, emphasizing that he carried out the assassination without the Party's knowledge, and in the “expectation that the court, which had been a prime target of Mas'ud invective, would shoulder the blame (Azimi, p. 134), Ruzbeh hoped “to polarize Iran and thus radicalize the Tudeh Party.” (Abrahimian, 1999, pp. 94-95; see also Katouzian, *The Political Economy of Iran*, p. 207; Esmā'ili, 1987, p. 208; Maleki, p. 81). His confessions entitled, *Kosrow Ruzbeh dar dādgāh-e neẓāmi*, was published by the Tudeh Party in 1961 (n.p.). The Party's omission of the section in which Ruzbeh talks of his direct involvement in the killings, as held by Nur-al-Din Kiānuri, cast the shadow on Mas'ud's death for several decades to come (Kiānuri, p. 400).

According to one account, Hajj 'Ali Razmārā (1901-1950), the military leader who harbored political ambitions, and eventually became prime minister in



1950, was climbing his way up on those years, and needed the support of both the army and the Soviet Union. Razmārā's ties with K̄osrow Ruzbeh and Tudeh Party, which proved fruitful at early stages, soon turned into animosity. Being aware, at least partially, of Razmārā's plan to overthrow the Pahlavi regime, Ruzbeh provided some confidential documents to Mas'ud for publication in *Mard-e emruz*. Instead, Mas'ud, handed the documents to Razmārā, in return for sixty thousand tomans.

Mas'ud, seeing the grim signs of an approaching storm on the horizon, had already planned to leave Iran and live in France for the rest of his life. He had sold his properties and had deposited the money along with the money he had received from Razmārā in a safe deposit in the National Bank of Iran ([Bank-e Melli-e Iran](#)). He did not know, however, that an informant of the Tudeh Party at *Mard-e emruz*, had reported to Ruzbeh that not only the documents were not to be published at the due date, but also Mas'ud will soon be out of the country. The news sealed Mas'ud's fate, and he was assassinated (*Šāyḡān*, 2001, pp. 140-42). After Mas'ud's death, Naṣr-Allāh Šifta succeeded to publish-with intermissions- five issues of *Mard-e emruz* (April 1948-June 1949), before its publication terminated (Šifta, 1984, p. 384).

Mas'ud's career as the editor of one of the most controversial newspapers in the history of Persian journalism was a tough game that he fought hard to win. His controversial image is heavily shrouded with ambiguities, not reducible to simple verdicts. His criticism of the most powerful political figures of the time contributed in making him a figure that conjured many that was good and bad about journalism in Iran. He is praised as an "acclaimed and assertive journalist" (Sepānlu, 1984, p. 1), and a journalist whose anarchistic and antisocial ideas recalls [Mirzāda Ešqi](#) (1894-1923), the poet and journalist of post-constitution era, whose passion for social justice and human rights cost him his life and whose burial ceremony turned into an occasion for public protest against dictatorship (Qā'ed, 1984, p. 234). At the other hand, he is criticized as a "rebellion with no cause" (Kamshad, p. 66), a dangerous demagogue, whose ambitions knew no bounds, and "the titleholder of defamation," as held by 'Abbās Mas'udi, the editor of *Eṭṭelā'āt* (Šifta, 1984, p. 125), who went so far as to file a lawsuit against Mas'ud.

Mas'ud died a rich man. He lived in a large garden compound and could afford the high tuition of an Italian boarding school in Tehran, where his daughter was enrolled. His lavish lifestyle, as held by Bozog 'Alavi "had nothing in common with the poor teachers portrayed in his novels." ('Alavi, p. 201)



According to Esmā'il Purvāli, a journalist with close ties with Mas'ud, "He was an able journalist, whose ambition and greed surpassed his knowledge and honesty." (Šāyḡān, 2001, p. 141)

Novels and Short Stories:

Ašraf-e maḳluqāt (The noblest of creatures), 1934.

Bahār-e 'omr (The bloom of life), Tehran, 1945

Dar talāš-e ma'āš (Struggling to earn a living), 1933.

Golhāi ke dar jahannam miruyand (The Flowers that grow in hell), Tehran, 1943

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