



MIR'ALĀ'I, AḤMAD

MIR'ALĀ'I, AḤmad (b. Isfahan, 21 Farvardin 1321 Š./10 April 1942; d. 2 Ābān 1374 Š./24 October 1995, [FIGURE 1](#)), editor of three literary magazines and translator of works of Western literature. Mir'alā'i was born into an educated, cultured family marked by the tension between the advocates of modernity and the Western way of life and those who subscribed to the traditional religious ideas. His father, 'Ali Mir'alā'i, was a physician by profession and an ardent nationalist actively supporting Moḥammad Moṣaddeq and his National Front (*Jebha-ye melli*). Mir'Alā'i's political activities had once led to his incarceration in Kōrramšahr by the British in 1941 during the occupation of Persia by the Allied. Aḥmad's interest in Western literature was kindled in childhood, when he would use his allowances to borrow popular translations of Western romances from a local barber and eagerly read them.

Mir'alā'i completed his secondary education in Isfahan and then, against his father's wishes who wanted him to continue in the family tradition and study medicine, he chose to follow his true passion for the literary world and enrolled at the University of Isfahan to study English language and literature, graduating with a Bachelor's degree in 1963. He then left for the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom and received an MA degree in English in 1967. Upon his return to Persia later that year, he was drafted for military service and spent two years (1967-69) in the Literacy Corps (*Sepāh-e dāneš*) as a teacher in the rural area of Baluchistan. He married his maternal cousin Nāhid Kiānfār in 1971; they had four daughters (Leyli, Širin, Šahrzād, and Homā), one of whom (Homā) died in early childhood (M. Mir'alā'i, 1999, pp.



108-10). In 1969 he joined the [Franklin Book Program](#) and served for three years as an editor of the Persian translations submitted for publication and also as the chief editor of *Ketāb-e emruz*, a quarterly of literary criticism published by the same firm. He then served for four years (1972-76) in the Ministry of Culture and Art (Wezārat-e farhang o honar) as the chief editor of *Farhang o zendagi*, a quarterly published by the ministry. During the same period of time he was also the chief editor of the weekly *Āyandagān-e adabi* a literary publication of the daily *Āyandagān*. He spent the next three years (1976-79) as the Persian cultural attaché, first in New Delhi and then in Karachi. His return to Persia coincided with the Revolution of 1978-79. He was unemployed for a period of time before opening a small bookstore called Āftāb and later re-named Zendarud, which also served as a publishing house. The bookstore soon became a gathering place for like-minded people, particularly young students who would often use the facility to engage Mir'alā'i in discussions involving cultural and literary issues. In his final years, Mir'alā'i also did some lecturing in Šahr-e Kord and Najafābād private universities (Doostkhah).

Mir'alā'i was a talented translator, who chose his texts judiciously and remained scrupulously faithful and skillfully capable in conveying the full range of their essential sense in elegant Persian, regardless of any social, political, or cultural considerations. He maintained that not to translate at all is a far better option than doing an imperfect job, and that a good translation would be as effective as its original version (A. Mir'alā'i, 1992b).

The list of Mir'alā'i's published works includes more than thirty independent features, as well as translations of numerous stories, poems, and articles that were published in various literary journals (e.g., *Jong-e Ešfahān*, *Mofid*) and papers. His translations of two novels (*Justine* and *Balthazar*) by Lawrence Durrell were censored and never published. The first novel was printed but all copies were ordered to be pulped. Mir'alā'i's greatest ambition was the translation of the entire works of William Shakespeare, which he had been preparing to start, when his dream was cut short by his untimely death (Doostkhah). A number of his works still remain unpublished. Some were at different times published and ready for distribution when they failed to pass the approval of authorities and were subsequently pulled off the shelves (*Motarjem* 27, fall 1992). In the last few months of his life, Mir'alā'i was busy writing his memoir, which was left unfinished with his untimely death (Š. Mir'alā'i, 2003)

Mir'alā'i was never involved in any political activities and never affiliated himself to any political ideology, group, or organization. Nonetheless, his personal democratic views on life, which were reflected in his works, as well as his membership and active involvement in the Writers Association of Iran (*Kānun-e nevisandagān-e Irān*) were deemed intolerable by certain centers of power. Consequently he became subject to interrogations and receiving death threats during the last few months of his life. He was among the 134 prominent writers and poets who signed an open letter protesting the excessive censorship by the government and demanding freedom of speech and tolerance towards views and ideas at variance with the official position.

Three days before his death, Mir'alā'i had noticed that a few individuals unknown to him were taking photos of him at Zendarud bookstore, and he later confided to a friend that he was scared and worried that his life could be in danger. On the day of his death, he was scheduled to give a lecture on modernism in Isfahan University, in the morning, which had to be cancelled due to his sudden disappearance (M. Mir'alā'i, 2003). He was kidnapped on the street in the morning as he walked to his bookstore; his dead body was found in the evening near the bookstore, leaning against a wall and a half-used bottle of spirits placed next to him. The coroner's report ascribed the cause of death to an unidentified injection, which had left its visible mark on the arm (M. Mir'alā'i, 2003).

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(Jalil Doostkhah)

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