



# MOLLA NASREDDIN I. THE PERSON

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**MOLLA NASREDDIN** (Mollā Naṣr-al-Din), one of the most celebrated personalities in Persian and Middle Eastern folklore.

## i. THE PERSON

Molla Nasreddin is a character who appears in thousands of stories, always witty, sometimes wise, even philosophic, sometimes the instigator of practical jokes on others and often a fool or the butt of a joke. Stories relating to Molla Nasreddin or Naṣr-al-Din Hoca (as he is called in Turkey) are generally humorous, but in the subtle humor there is always a lesson to be learned. These stories involve people and incidents in all walks of life, including kings, beggars, politicians, clerics, etc. He is known by different names in different countries: “Koja Naṣr-al-Din” by the Kazakhs and Uzbeks; “Naṣr-al-Din Effendi” by the Uigurs; “Nasarat” by the Chechens; “Hoja Naṣr-al-Din” by the Greeks; “Mollā Naṣr-al-Din” by Azarbaijanis, Iranians, and Afghans; and “Mošfeqi” by the Tajiks. Among the Arabs he is often referred to as “Joḥā al-Rumi” and the stories that are attributed to Joḥā or Joḥi of the Arabs are the same as those of Mulla Nasreddin. (Mojāhed, p. 26).

While, for example, the people of Bukhara claim him to be a native of that city, the Turks have tried to make Naṣr-al-Din Hoca a denizen of Turkey. According to them, he was born in 1208 in Hortu, a village near the Anatolian town of



Sivrihisar, and moved to Akşehir in 1237 to study under notable scholars of the time. He served as judge (*qāzī*), from time to time until his death in 1284. His grave is in Akşehir (Köprülü). There is, however, a story of his meeting with Timur, which does not correspond to these dates. On the other hand, Azarbaijani scholars, such as M. H. Tahmasb and M. Sultanov find similarities between Molla Nasreddin and the scholar of the Mongol period Naşir al-Din ʿUṣi (Tehmasib, Introd.). The Azarbaijani folklorist Velayet Guliyev has collected and translated the stories and pleasantries of Molla Nasreddin that are popular among twenty-three nations (Guliyev). Thematically he has divided them into sixteen chapters and has given examples of from different sources. Individual sections deal with different themes and situations commonly found in the tales, for instance, Molla Nasreddin and the Oriental system of justice, Molla Nasreddin as a fool, Molla Nasreddin and his family, Molla Nasreddin and his donkey and so on. For many years the Turkish scholar Pertev Boratav worked on a huge corpus of materials related to Molla Nasreddin tradition not only in Turkey but throughout the Muslim world. He also wanted to catalogue analogues in international oral tradition. After Boratav's death in 1998, İlhan Başgöz published his work along with an essay of his own (Başgöz). Boratev examined the early references to Molla Nasreddin, and catalogued the compilation of the tales in manuscripts and published works. Başgöz was able to record diachronic changes in the tradition by examining sources from different periods. Apart from a stylistic tendency to move from short stories to more developed narratives, as one moves in time, there are differences in the treatment of sexuality in more sexually permissive tribal societies to a relatively more sedentary, urban, and sexually restricted milieu.

It seems that Molla Nasreddin has his origin in the personality of Joḥā. Joḥā is first mentioned by 'Omar b. Abi Rabi'a (d. 715) and by Abu Atāhiya (d. 837; Abu Sa'd Ābi, V, p. 307). In the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries he is mentioned by Abu 'Oṭmān Jāḥeẓ (pp. vii-viii). and Ebn al-Nadim (pp. p. 375, tr. II, p. 736?) respectively. While all three sources stress his foolishness, Jāḥeẓ gives a story where Joḥā very cleverly guesses a man to be a native of Ḥoms from his clothes and demeanor. From this time on references to Joḥā increases in Arabic, Persian and Turkish sources. Ebn al-Nadim (d. 385 /1007) mentions an anonymous collection of anecdotes (*Ketāb al-nawāder*) featuring Joḥā (Ebn al-Nadim, p. 375, tr. II, p. 736). Rumi in his *Maṭnawī* elaborately relates five stories about him. Šams Tabrizi in *Maqālāt*, Sanā'i in his *Ḥadiqa al-ḥaqiqa*, and Rašid Waṭwāt in his *Laṭā'if al-amṭāl wa ṭrā'ef al-aqwāl* each relate one story



about Joḥā (Şalāḥi, p.112). ‘Obayd Zākāni refers to Joḥā eleven times in his works and gives seven stories under his name in his “Arabic and Persian Stories.” Furthermore, fifty-six stories or pleasantries without the name of Joḥā in the same “Arabic and Persian Stories” bear distinct resemblance to the stories of Molla Nasreddin (‘Obayd Zākāni, 2007, pp. 91-125). All of these are given under the name of Joḥā. Some of these can be found in other sources like *Laṭāyef al-tawāyef* by Faḵr-al-Din ‘Ali Şafi. It is only from the turn of the 20th century that references to Molla Nasreddin abound in Persian and Azarbaijani literature. The Azeri poet Tāherzāda Şāber made the story of Mulla and his blanket the subject of a satirical poem. Jalil Memedqulizadeh chose Molla Nasreddin as a title for his well-known satirical journal which was published for nearly twenty-six years in Tbilisi, Tabriz, and Baku, and had a strong impact on the press of the Constitutional period of Iran (see [CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION](#)). Moḥammad-Taḳi Malek-al-Şo‘arā’ Bahār versified one of the anecdotes of Molla Nasreddin under the psuedonym “Mirzā Reżā Rawzaḵvān” (Şalāḥi, p. 131). Iranian satirist Abu’l-Qāsem Pāyenda analyzed his Molla Nasreddin’s personality and sense of humor.

The *Nawāder Joḥā* was first published in Egypt in 1859-60 under the title of *Nawāder Ḳoja Naşr-al-Din al-molaqqab al-Joḥā al-Rumi*. In an other version that was published in 1881, again the same combination of Naşr-al-Din Ḳoja and Joḥā is mentioned as *Nawāder Joḥā wa Aş‘ab* (p. 17). The earliest Turkish version seems to be *Nawāder Ḳoja Naşr-al-Din* (Istanbul, 1837). According to Ahmad Mojāhed (p. 38), the stories and pleasantries of Molla Nasreddin were compiled from the Arabic anecdotes of Joḥā and other similar Arabic and possibly Persian sources. It seems that the Molla Nasreddin’s anecdotes were already popular in Turkey when they were added to the already known stories of Joḥā.

*Nawāder Joḥā al-Kobrā*, which includes the largest collection of stories, was mainly translated by Ḥekmat Şarif Ṭarābloşi (1912) from a Turkish version, who expanded the collection by adding the Arabic *nawāder* to the translation. Another version is by ‘Abd-al-Sattār Aḥmad Farrāj (1914), whose collection has been mostly garnered from Arabic sources. The first Persian edition, a collection of 216 stories translated from the above-mentioned *Nawāder al-Ḳoja Naşr-al-Din* (1862), came out in Tehran in 1881 without the name of the translator. The widespread popularity of Molla Nasreddin’s stories in Iran began with the publication of an illustrated collection of 539 stories by Moḥammad Ramażāni under the title of *Mollā Naşr-al-Din* in 1940, which also



served as the source material for all other collection published in Iran since then. There is, however, a difference of 379 stories, taken from various Persian and Arabic sources (Mojāhed, pp. 593-712), between the first anonymous Persian edition and that of Ramazāni.

In conclusion it can be said that the Molla Nasreddin tradition of stories seems to be the result of two different corpora of stories originating from two personalities of uncertain historical identity (namely, Joḥā and Molla Nasreddin), who, throughout the ages and in different countries, have acquired their own somewhat different characteristics. It also can be said that Molla Nasreddin stories developed on the basis of Joḥā stories and were gradually increased as more and more materials were added. It can be likened to the confluence of two rivers that, while flowing through different environments, each one acquires its own special characteristics. Out of these anecdotes, some of which might have existed before in different lands, emerges the wise-fool personality of Molla Nasreddin as a character embodying an amusing mixture of silliness and shrewdness. This basically low-class wise fool, who carries the title of a well-learned man (*mollā*), with his ready wit, life experience, and bonhomie typifies the inner strength of ordinary people. He often humorously portrays centralized despotism or sham piety and resists them in his own way. The other side of Molla Nasreddin is his foolishness and naiveté that often times imparts a meaningful sense of criticism. For instance, in one story the donkey of Molla Nasreddin is missing and he asks a man if he has seen it. He says the donkey has changed and has become the judge (*qāzi*) of the town. Mollā says: “I believe you since when I was teaching my students, the donkey would shake his ears and listen attentively.” Then Moll goes on to reclaim the judge of the town as his donkey and ends up being beaten up by the judge’s attendants.

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