



MOSTA'AN, HOSAYN-QOLI

MOSTA'AN, Hosayn-Qoli (Ḥosayn-Qoli Mosta'ān, b. Tehran, 1904; d. Tehran, March 5, 1983), noted serial writer, journalist, and translator.

His father, Ġolām-Ḥosayn, a religious man with poetic sensibilities, was an accountant at the Qajar court. He wanted his son to become a clergyman. At the age of four, Hosseinqoli was sent to a traditional elementary school (*maktab*; see [EDUCATION](#) *iii*), and after an initial period of religious education in Tehran he went to Qom where he took introductory lessons in Arabic, theology and Islamic philosophy. Despite his father's strong disagreement, fearing his son "would end up with no religious beliefs," (Āžand, p. 154) he completed his secondary education at the *Dār-al-fonun* (q.v.). However, with the tightening grip of disagreements between father and son, he left Tehran and took up various jobs in order to draw a living. He worked, in his own words "as a stoker on trains, as a waiter, and even as a preacher at religious ceremonies." (Ibid, p. 154) He endured a few years of hardship, despite which, he completed his studies at the Faculty of Law and Political Science (Elāhi, 1999, p. 111). In 1921, he began a period of cooperation as a photo-journalist with *Iran*, an independent paper founded by Zayn-al-'Ābedin Rahnemā, (Etteḥād, p.667). He went through every stage of journalism: office work, translation, interviewing, and photography. His translation of Michel Zevaco's (1860-1918) famous cloak and dagger novels *Les Pardaillan*, as well as Joseph Marie Eugène Sue (1804-1857)'s *Le Juif errant* ("The Wandering Jew", 10 vols., 1844-1845), were serialized in the newspaper to great popular success. In 1932, he was appointed as the newspaper's editor.



His translation of a number of short stories appeared in 1927 in *Afsāna*, a journal of literary review founded by Moḥammad Ramažāni, which published, exclusively, works of fiction either by contemporary foreign writers in Persian translation, or by Persian writers. His translation of His most significant and highly popular translation, Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, entitled *Binavāyān*, was first serialised in the newspaper *Iran*, and eventually published as a book in five volumes, with an introduction in ninety pages on Hugo's life and works by Mosta'an himself (1928). *Binavāyān* enjoyed a smooth and flawless prose, a hybrid of "the romantic style of the era, and idiomatic phrases of religious usage (Sepānlu, p.58), and turned out to be one of the most widely read books during Režā Shah's reign (Emāmi, p.48), outselling the most popular translated novels of the period, including Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Translating *Les Misérables* was a turning point in Mosta'an's literary career, and encouraged him to switch from translation into writing fictions. "It brought me fame. My short and long stories were published in *Mehregān* and *Mehr* magazines. A few of them were published as a book." (Mosta'an, p. 39) "What pushed me into writing novels was my familiarity with European literature. I was acquainted with French and Arabic from the age of five. I read a great number of classics." (Āžand, p.157) In 1935, he began writing novels in earnest, under the pseudonym "Ḥ. M. Ḥamid," for the short-lived periodical *Mehregān*.

In 1936, subsequent to the withdrawal of Sa'id Nafisi (1895 – 1966) from the monthly *Mehr*, Mosta'an was appointed as its editor. He was also the editor of *Iran* till 1939, when he decided to publish *Rāhnamā-ye zendegi* (Life Guide, October 1940-September 1941), a bi-monthly journal whose editor was the writer and a translator Māh-Ṭal'at Pesyān (1921- 1983), Mosta'an's second wife. *Rāhnamā -ye zendegi*, printed in large format on white paper with illustrations, "was the first modern Iranian magazine." Ṣadr-e Ḥāšemi, vol. 2, p. 319; Behzādi, p. 540). However, it failed to compete with *Eṭṭelā'āt-e Haftegi*, an affiliated weekly publication of *Eṭṭelā'āt* (q.v.), the oldest running Tehran afternoon daily newspaper founded in 1923 by 'Abbās Mas'udi (1901-1974), and ceased publication after 28 issues.

Two pages of *Rāhnamā-ye zendegi* were dedicated to stories, games, and quizzes, mostly translated from European languages, for children. The section, under the heading of *Rāhnamā barā-ye kudakān* (Guide for children), comprised a column, called *Bešnow-o-bāvar makon* (Hear, but don't believe). Many literary figures, including Aḥmad Šāmlu (poet and writer, 1925- 2000),



contributed to this column and, shedding a light on superstitious belief, tried to prove them wrong in a simple and humorous language. In another section of the magazine, entitled *beḵnim-o-beraqsim* (Let us sing and dance), simple songs for children were printed with musical notation; an unprecedented undertaking in the history of the Iranian press (Moḥammadi and Qā'ini, pp. 628-29). *Rāhnamā -ye zendegi* served as a model for the weekly magazines of the 1940's, which tried to stay in tune with popular tastes, and relied mostly on serialized stories to attract more readers.

The increasing state censorship in the very last years of Rezā Shah's rein, disallowed the publication of political books and articles, and in turn, contributed to the increased popularity of love stories and detective works of fiction. During this period, Mosta'an, following the footsteps of Alfonse de Lamartine (1790-1869) and Chateaubriand, in stressing upon emotions as a source of aesthetic experience, and adding an Iranian flavour to it (Behzādi, p. 540), published a new pocket book every month. The books, usually in 120 to 160 pages, had alluring titles, such as *Āzitā*, or *Nuri & Ġazāl*, and revolved around the sentimental love affairs, which left the romantic readers into tears.

Mosta'an was a prolific writer and wrote at great speed. "According to the writer himself, he slept for no more than three hours each night. He wrote some of the novels while he arranged the magazine pages at the printing house. He translated much of *Les Misérables* in the same way, and finished the novel *Šida* in six hours." (Āžand, p.157, Behzādi, p. 541) The increasing demand for his stories, eventually took its tolls, and his works gradually suffered from monotonous plots, unrealistic descriptions and one-dimensional characters. Nevertheless, his fluent rhythmic prose, and his vivid imagination ensured his status as the unrivalled author of popular love stories for many years to come. Writing over one thousand short stories and two hundred novels, he called himself "the man of one thousand stories" (Behzādi, p.552). His income from writing was immense. "During 1960 and 1961, his monthly salary for writing three serialised novels was about forty five thousand Rials (Elāhi, 1999, p. 120). It is interesting to note that while Mosta'an's stories enjoyed many reprints, with as many as fifty thousand copies (Behzādi, p.550), the works of Sadeq Hedayat (1902- 1951) were published only in small numbers. Hedayat, and his likeminded intellectuals, never took Mota'an's works seriously. Hedayat, under the pseudonym 'Ali-Ašḡar Soruš, wrote a satirical critique on Mosta'an's novel, *Nāz*, and lampooned his writing style (*Musiqi*, 3/2, Ordibehešt 1320 Š./1941; repr., in *Neveštahā-ye parākanda-y Šadeq*



Hedāyat, ed., Ḥasan Qā'emiān, Tehran, 1965), to which Mosta'an in an article reacted harshly, reinforcing his image as the symbol of cheap popular writing in Iran (Mir'Ābedini, p.228).

Following the occupation of Iran by the Allied forces in September 1941, and the subsequent abdication of Reza Shah Pahlavi Iranians enjoyed a rare and short-lived period of freedom of expression, and books with a socio-political bent grew popularity. Mosta'an followed the trend, embraced politics for a short time, and worked as the editor with the newspapers *Iran*, *Aḵbār-e Ruz*, *Aḵbār* (1942- 43), *Keyhān* (1942), and *Dastur* (1946). However, unsuccessful in politicized writing, he soon resumed writing stories, and began a period of cooperation with *Tehrān-e moṣavvar*, a little known weekly magazine in 1946, transforming it into a best seller in a short period of time (Behzādi, p. 546). The period, as held by a commentator, came to be recognized as the golden age of serialized story writing in the history of Persian journalism (Elāhi, 1998, p. 730). Reading serialised stories constituted the main pastime of the people, when television was still a too far substitute.

With the tight grip of censorship on the press that followed the overthrow of the government of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq in 1953 (see [COUP d' ETAT 1332 Š./1953](#)), Mosta'an, the serial writer, once again, took over, and proved to be at his best. *Rābe'a*, *Āahr-āšub*, and *Āfat*, all appeared in installments in *Tehrān-e moṣavvar*, and earned Mosta'an vast popularity for a period of fourteen years, along with the highest salary ever paid to those who wrote for the press (Behzādi, I, p. 543). His stories rewarded many magazines with a higher circulation, notable among them *Omid-e Iran*, *Ferdowsi*, *Etteḥād-e melal*, *Majalla-ye Radio Tehran*, as well as *Sepid-o-siāh*, which published two stories of Mosta'an each week: one single-issue story, and another in installments (Behzādi, p. II, 346). He used several pen names: Anuša for historical stories, Ḥabib for adventure stories, Adiba Kamāli for stories that depicted the situation of women in Iran, *Yeki az nevisandegān* (By one of the writers), for the short stories, as well as *Minu*, *Morād*, and *Sādegān* (Etteḥād, p. 665).

Šahr-Āšub, whose womanizer central figure, Āqā Bālā Khan, amused readers for many years, is generally regarded as one of Mosta'an's most noted works. Mention should also be made of some of his romantic love stories, such as *Ātaš be jān-e šam' fetad* (May the candle be set on fire) and *Deli dar tondbād-e havas* (A heart in the hurricane of caprice), which are characterized by Mosta'an prose at its best (Behzādi, p. 550).



Rābe'a, Mosta'an's highly popular historical novel, is set during the 11th century and chronicles the adventurous life of the last Saffarid emir who, in competition over women and throne, murders two of his sons. The central character of *Āfat*, on the contrary, is a fictitious personage of aristocratic background. The breadth of the socio-cultural events of the decades that preceded and followed the Constitutional Movement are incorporated into the account of the tumultuous lives of the male and female characters of the story (Sepānlu, p. 160). Publication of *Āfat*, Mosta'an's own choice as his best novel (Āžand, p. 157), took more than three hundred issues of *Tehrān-e moṣavvar* (1951-1957). It was never published as a book.

By creating a likeable anxiety in the narrative, and postponing the resolution of the plot, Mosta'an succeeded to keep the readers engaged with his stories for a long period of time. At the top page of each installment, always appeared an up to the date synopsis of the story, which made it possible for the novice readers to follow the storyline (Elāhi, 1999, P. 111). Although Mosta'an, in his own account, wrote his stories with some moral messages in mind (Mosta'an, p. 40), he often titillated the public with coy eroticism, to increase the circulation numbers of the journals in which his novels appeared as installments.

Mosta'an, however, did not limit himself to writing fiction. He wrote film critiques, as well manuscripts for a number of popular films, such as *Gonāhkār* (Guilty, 1953) directed by Medi Gerāmi. Some of his plays were staged in the years that followed the Allied occupation of Iran in 1941 (For the list of his plays see: Behzādi, p.549; Navvāb-e Ṣafā, p. 85). He published his poems under the pseudonyms Šifta, and Madhuš in newspapers, such as *Nasim-e šomal*, *Ḳanda* and *Omid* (Āžand, p. 156; Etteḥād, p. 664). He also produced songs under the pseudonym Bidel (For a detailed list of his songs, see Navvāb-e Ṣafā, pp. 106-07).

In 1947, he was appointed as the Director of Radio Iran, where he worked for two years. Mosta'an was a quiet person, and a disciplined writer. His life imitated his fictions. He married several times and had nine daughters and one son. At the age of seventy-four, he fell in love with a fourteen-year-old student of his and, after three years, married her. The turbulent years of this last marriage were too short, however. Mosta'an died at the age of 79.



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