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SADEQI, BAHRAM

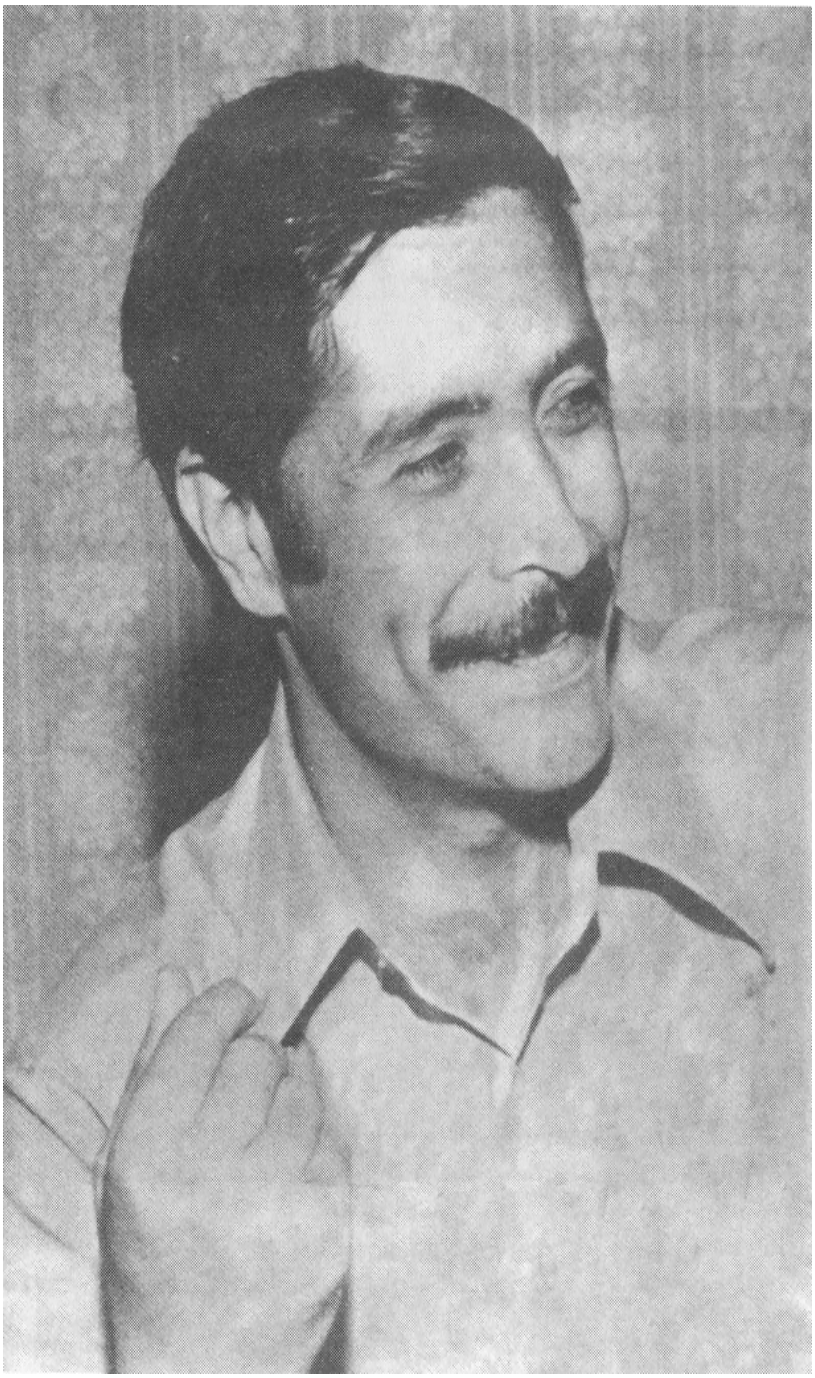

Figure 1. Photograph of Bahram Sadeqi.

SADEQI, **Bahram** (Bahrām Ṣādeqi, b. Najaf-Ābād, Isfahan, 8 January 1937; d. Tehran, 3 January 1985), poet and noted modernist fiction writer of the 20th century, who explored new literary techniques with almost each piece he wrote (Figure 1).

Bahram Sadeqi was the fourth and last child of Ḥosayn-ʿAli Ṣādeqi, a small retailer in Najaf-Ābād, near Isfahan, and Jahān Solṭān, who instilled in him a passion for Persian poetry (Aṣlāni, pp. 21-23; Maḥmudi, pp. 53-54). Sadeqi completed his elementary education at Dehqān School in Najaf-Ābād in 1949, and attended Adab High School in Isfahan for his secondary education, where he met his life long friend Moḥammad Ḥoquqi (1937-2009), who soon came to prominence as a poet and literary critic. In 1955, he moved to Tehran, where he attended medical school at the Tehran University. In 1966, before finishing his medical studies, he began his military service and after the mandatory period of basic training, served the rest of his tour of duty in the Health Corp in Yāsuj, Khuzestan (Aṣlāni, pp. 101-05; Maḥmudi, p. 66). When he returned to Tehran in 1968 he began working in a clinic in Karaj, and at the same time, continued his education at the Tehran University, and received his medical degree in 1974. In 1976 Sadeqi married Žilā Pirmorādi and had two daughters. He spent the rest of his life in Tehran, except for short periods of time in 1982 and 1983 when he was sent to Dezful to serve in the war zone.

On 3 January 1985, a year after his mother's death- an event that had a devastating effect on his life- he died at the age of 48 from a heart failure presumably related to his severe drug addiction (Aṣlāni, pp. 10-11), which had prevented him from writing in his last years and ended his life short (Maḥmudi, pp. 75-80).

Sadeqi started writing poetry and prose at a young age and was still in high school when his poems, under the pseudonym "Ṣahbā Meqdāri," an anagram of his name, appeared in literary journals of the period. Although well-versed in classical Persian literature and familiar with Persian prosody (see ʿARŪŻ), he followed the line set by Nimā Yušij (1896-1960), who adhered to a free and independent mode of expression. As noted by a literary critic, some of his poems were not characteristically distinguishable from that of Nimā's (Aṣlāni, pp. 98-100).

Sadeqi's fame as a modernist writer began with the publication of his short stories in his early 20s, which coincided with the years following the CIA-assisted military coup of 1953 (see COUP d' ETAT 1332 Š./1953), a momentous historical event with profound reverberations on the nation's psyche. His first short story "Fardā dar rāh ast" ("Tomorrow is on the way," appeared in 1956 in the prestigious literary journal *Soḵan* (7/9, pp. 889-98). It was followed by the publication of several of his most noted short stories, such as "Vasvās" ("Obsession," *Soḵan,* 12/7, 1956, pp. 1171-82), "Sarāsar ḥadeṯa" ("Action-

packed," *Soḵan,* 10/2, 1959, pp. 183-207), "Aḏān-e ḡorub" (The evening prayer, *Soḵan*, 7/11, 1960, pp. 803-09), "Taʾṯir-e motaqābel" ("Counter-impact", *Soḵan*, 17/12, 1961, pp. 811-819), and "Aqā-ye nevisanda tāza-kār ast" (Mr. writer has just started to write, *Ketāb-e hafta*, 41, 1962, pp. 33-40). The publication of the stories won Sadeqi instant prominence, and as noted by a critic, heralded the emergence of a writer who used irony in the very fabric of his stories, and grafted laughter and tears to create sarcastic grin (Sāʾedi, p. 114).

In his frequent trips to Isfahan throughout these years, Sadeqi used to participate in the Ṣāʾeb Literary Circle (Anjoman-e adabi-e Ṣāʾeb), which had just been established in Isfahan by the poet Ḥamid Moṣaddeq (1940-1998) and his like-minded intellectuals. He also contributed stories to *Jong-e Eṣfahān* (Isfahan anthology, q.v.), an independent, avant-garde literary periodical, established in Isfahan in 1965 by a group of young writers and poets, including Hušang Golširi (1938-2000; q.v.), Abu'l-Ḥassan Najafi (b. 1933) and Moḥammad Ḥoquqi. His most celebrated novella, *Malakut* (*The Heavenly Kingdom*; q.v.), was published first in the periodical *Kayhān hafta* (Weekly Kayhan, 1961, no.12, pp. 7-101), later in the collection *Sangar o qomqomahā-ye ḵāli* (The trench and the empty canteens, Tehran, 1970), and finally independently in 1971 (Tehran). Supernatural elements and somber ruminations are distinctive features of the novella. The critical reception of Sadeqi's stories earned him, with Hušang Golširi, the prestigious Foruq Farroḵzād literary award in 1975.

Sadeqi was an avid reader of crime fiction and detective stories, particularly the work of such novelists as Agatha Christie (1890-1976), the noted British crime writer, and George Simenon (1903-1989), the Belgian prolific author of nearly 200 detective stories, which he used to read in their original languages. "Detective stories," as he pointed out in an interview with *Āyandegān*, "are pure stories….They are not concerned about the society or politics …They offer no moral messages. They are just stories… If a writer can achieve such purity, he has done a great job." (Maḥmudi, pp. 108-09).

In his studied attempt to write 'pure' stories without any moral or political message, he rejected the conventional techniques, such as dramatic plotting, coherent concept of time, and psychological analysis of characters, and turned, instead, to such avant-garde techniques of story writing as manipulating the narrative time; portraying characters from multiple perspectives; treating the process of writing as a part of narrative; placing real characters in unreal and uncanny situations/scenes, or conversely, depicting uncanny, and even supernatural, characters in real situations; suspension of judgment; and

impersonal depiction of ordinary peoples and random events of everyday life.

"Mehmān nāḵˇānda dar šahr-e bozorg" (The uninvited guest in the big city, *Soḵan*, 1963, 15/11-12, pp. 1080-100) is the story of a few days in the life of an accountant, who is trying to act as an intellectual, and whose so-called intellectual life is disturbed by the arrival of one of his relatives, from his native village, without having notified him (Ḥoquqi, 1998, p. 194). The story could be a slightly modified version of a real event. Sadeqi, however, employs irony, sarcasm, and exaggeration to an extent that it would be practically impossible to consider the event as 'real'; a modified version of the Brechtian "alienation" technique which results in a clear distinction between 'reality' and the story (Khorrami, pp. 115-16).

In "Haft gisu-ye ḵunin" (Seven bloody hair locks, *Soḵan*, 11/2, 1960, pp. 207-28), a real character walks into a mythical land, kills the demons and releases the epical and historical heroes from prison; as soon as they find themselves free they forget all about the "real" hero who has freed them.

Sadeqi's democratic aesthetics frees his stories from the dominance of an omniscient narrator's voice, thus opening a space for various characters to narrate their own stories. Their accounts, often incompatible with each other, would keep the readers in suspense and invite them to play an active role in affording meaning to a complex work of fiction, imagining multiple endings for a story, which often offers none.

In "Āqā-ye nevisanda tāza-kār ast," we read one story from three perspectives; a writer who has written a story, a critic who is discussing the story with the writer, and a narrator who is writing the story of this story in the making and, frequently addresses the reader, generating a distancing effect, and inviting the reader to take a critical role through the process of reading. (Nafisi, pp. 33-34). The employment of the technique loads the narrative with contradictory points of view, and offers interpretations inside interpretations, which meaningful or absurd cast a mysterious quality on the structure of the story.

Sadeqi was fascinated, more than anything else, with the absurdity of scenes with which crime fictions usually begin and end. His opening sentence to his acclaimed novella *Malakut*, generally considered a turning point in the history and development of the modern techniques of story writing in Iran, offers a telling example. "At eleven, on the Wednesday evening of that week, Mr.

Maveddat was possessed by the jinn."

The mysterious tone of Sadeqi's stories is often amplified by the ironic titles that he chooses for his stories and the illusive names by which his characters are introduced. "Sarāsar ḥādeṯa," too far from any action or event, is Sadeqi's masterful rendition of one night in the monotonous life of the residents of a house. Overwhelmed by anxieties and fears, and detached from what is happening in society, the characters, dishonest not only to their neighbors and families but also to themselves (Sepānlu, 1989, pp. 215-18), take refuge in alcohol, mysticism and futile debates. Similarly the setting of "Sangar o qomomahā-ye ḵāli" one of Sadeqi's most noted stories, which was first published in *Soḵan* (9/3, 1958, pp. 237-47) and later in a collection by the same title, is a small room wherein an ordinary man spends the whole day under a quilt, trying to find something to think about. His signature command of irony appears at its best in both stories.

Sadeqi's fictional names, also, are often colored by a macabre and satirical tone. Dr. Ḥātam, the mysterious physician and the central character of *Malakut* is engaged in an endless process of bestowing death upon people. "Nāšenās" (Anonymous), or "Āqā-ye felāni" (Mr. so and so), appear as the names of fictional characters in *Malakut* and "Qarib-al-voquʿ" (Imminent, *Soḵan,* 10/9, 1959, pp. 986-96), respectively. In "Vasvās" and "Kalāf-e sar-dar-gom" (Enigma, *Soḵan*, 1/8, 1955, pp. 63-72), characters are not designated by names.

Although his characters come from all walks of life, and include students, civil servants, villagers, and teachers, they are all driven by similar fears, anxieties, and morbid fantasies (Yavari, p. 586; Mirʿābedini, 1, 2004, pp. 320-23; Talattof, pp. 71-72). Their backgrounds are always kept to minimum. Instead of physical appearance or personal background, a specific feature or trait may become the character's idiosyncratic focus. Identity, or rather fake identity, which Sadeqi considers as the "malady of the century" (Sadeqi, 1970, p. 118), is yet another recurrent motif in his poems and stories. In a poem written in 1955 he tackles the idea of lost identity with a broken mirror (Aṣlāni, p. 339). Unable to see himself in it, he is worried that his face may change and he will not be able to recognize himself. Two years later he treats the same motif in "Kalāf-e sar-dar-gom," depicting the incapability of human beings to distinguish their own images and to recognize their real faces. Sadeqi's formidable satirical powers are fully displayed in this story. A customer goes to a photo studio to collect the photos that he has taken two days ago, only to find out, in bewilderment,

that neither the photographer nor himself could recognize the photo that belongs to him.

Many of his stories mirror the Iranian society after the 1953 Coup, which he portrays as a society pervaded by fear, uncertainty, and repression of liberal thought. An obsessive engagement with death also appears as a recurrent motif in his fiction. In "Bā kamāl-e taʿassof," which was first published in *Ṣadaf* literary magazine in October 1958, a low rank employee collects obituaries from the evening newspapers to fill his idle nights. While he is doing this he imagines his own death. But as the story goes on we realize that his imaginings of his memorial ceremony depict the life he has; an image not far removed from the cruel realities and moral amnesia that have swept Iran in the post coup d'état period (Sepānlu, p. 217; Mirʿābedini, 2004, vol. 1, p. 317-18). The dark, nihilistic climate of Sadeqi's stories, although in line with the most visible characteristic of the literary works in 1950s and 1960s, earned him harsh criticism (Maḥmudi, p. 65; Mirṣādeqi, 1986, pp. 648-52; for Mirṣādeqi's detailed description of Sadeqi's work see Idem, *Dāstān-nevishā-ye nāmdār-e moʿāṣer*, Tehran, 2002).

The last years of Sadeqi's short life were shrouded in severe addiction and betrayed hopes. He almost stopped writing, and instead was taken by irregular episodes of instant creativity, during which he narrated his stories orally to his friends. "Sadeqi now 'writes' oral stories... Don't forget to have a recorder handy ("Čehrahā va ḵabarhā," *Keyhan,* no. 9969, Monday 29 Šahrivar 1355; see also Aṣlāni, pp. 124-26; Maḥmudi, p. 64). As noted by Golširi, Sadeqi never put on paper many of the sketches, which he completed in his mind, and none of them saw the light of the day as a published text (Golširi, 1998, pp. 19-26).

Although Sadeqi's published works, unlike many in his generation, number only few, his influence on his contemporary writers was immense. Hušang Golširi, one of the most significant writers of the second half of 20th century Iran, both in his affectionate memorial address for Ṣādeqi ("Nevisanda-ye *Malakut* hamčenān bā māst," in Ḥassan Maḥmudi, *Ḵun-e ābi bar zamin-e namnāk: dar naqd o moʿarrefi-e Bahrām Ṣādeqi*, Tehran, 1998, pp. 19-26.), where he evokes Ṣādeqi's sardonic humor and eccentric life, and in scattered references in his critical essays (e.g. in "Neveštan-e romān ṣabr-e Ayyub miḵˇāhad," in *Bāḡ dar bāḡ*, 1999, II, p. 783), acknowledges Ṣādeqi's considerable impact on him, particularly in the early years of his writing (Mirābedini, 1995, p. 114). As noted by a critic of the next generation, Sadeqi's efforts to experiment with the literary analysis of every conceivable

component of a narrative in a 'literary laboratory', found followers among his contemporaries, as well as the writers who succeeded him, most notable among them Taqi Modarresi (1931-1997, q.v.) and Šahryār Mandanipur (Khorrami, pp. 115-16).

Recognized as one of the most instrumental challengers to the domination of social realism in contemporary Persian literature, Sadeqi has been praised for his studied employment of avant-garde techniques of writing (Mirʿābedini, 2004,1, pp. 311-21); his non-dramatized depiction of an absurdly nightmarish world in which the human beings are condemned to live an absurd life (Sāʿedi, pp. 114-15); his success in maintaining the moral ambiguity of the situation; his sardonic humor, bitter satire, and depersonalized portrayal of ordinary people (Aṣlāni, 74-5); and, above all, for his adherence to the essence of story writing as an art. As held by Kaveh Basmenji in his introduction to the forthcoming English translation of Sadeqi's stories, entitled *Malakut and Other Stories by Bahram Sadeqi,* "Bahram Sadeqi's presence in—and influence upon—contemporary Persian prose fiction was like that of a lone meteorite: appearing in a blinding flash, instantly yet fleetingly illuminating its surroundings, then abruptly fading into the darkness, leaving only a completely original, overwhelming and fantastic trail, the remainder of something singularly magnificent that we cannot hope to ever see repeated."

Twenty-five of Sadeqi's short stories, mostly written in 1950s and published in *Soḵan,* appeared in the 1970 collection of *Sangar o qomqomahā-ye ḵāli.* His poems were collected and published with his unfinished stories, including his last written story, "Vaʿda-ye didār bā juju jetsu," (A date with Juju Jetsu), part of a projected novel, by Moḥammad Reżā Aṣlāni in *Bahrām Ṣādeqi*: *Bāzmāndahā-ye ḡaribi āšnā,* Tehran, 2005). The collection also includes Sadeqi's interviews with the journals of the period, including *Ferdowsi* (pp. 505-48), *Āyandegān* (pp. 549-63), *Rastāḵiz-e Javān* (pp. 564-78) and *Keyhān* (pp. 579-88).

For the complete list of Sadeqi's short stories see: Aṣlāni, pp. 9-11; Maḥmudi, pp. 348-52). The English translation of several of Sadeqi's stories by Kaveh Basmenji, entitled *Malakut and Other Stories by Bahrām Ṣādeqi,* is scheduled for publication in 2011. The collection, besides *Malakut* includes: "Fardā dar rāh ast" ("Tomorrow is on the way"), "Vasvās" ("The obsession"), "Bā kamāl-e taʾassof" ("Most regrettably"; also translated by Marcia E. Mottahedeh as *With Deepest Regrets*, The Literary Review 18, 1975, pp. 129-35), "Sarāsar ḥadeṯa" ("Action-packed"), "Qarib-al-voquʿ" ("Imminent"), "Tadris dar bahār-e del-

angiz” (“Teaching in a lovely spring”; also translated by Minoo S. Southgate as “Teaching in a Pleasant Spring,” *Modern Persian Short Stories,* Washington D. C., 1980, pp. 67-79), “Zanjir” (“The chain”), Dāstān barā-ye kudadakān” (“A tale for children”), “Sangar o qomqomahā-ye ḵāli” (“The trench and the empty Canteens”; also translated by Alexandra Dunietz under the same title, *Stories from Iran: A Chicago Anthology 1921-1991*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad, Washington D.C., pp. 325-39), and ʿĀfiyat” (“Good Health).

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