



YEKI BUD, YEKI NABUD

YEKI BUD, YEKI NABUD (Berlin, 1921, tr. by Mansur Heshmat Moyyad and Paul Sprachman as *Once Upon a Time*, New York, 1985), the first collection of modern Persian short stories, and, arguably the foremost work by the eminent fiction writer Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh ([Moḥammad ‘Ali Jamālzāda](#), also Djamalzadeh, 1892-1997)

The title of the collection, generally regarded as representing a departure from the classic genre of story telling in Iran (Āryanpur, II, p. 278; Yarshater, p. 34; Jazayery, p. 260), replicates the traditional formulaic opening of Persian folktales (*qeṣṣa*). The collection itself contains a foreword (“Dibāča,” tr. by Haideh Daragahi, as “Preface,” 1984), six satirical short stories and sketches: “Fārsi šekar ast” (‘Persian is Sugar’), “Rajol-e siāsi”, (‘The Politician’), “Dusti-e kāle kerse” (‘With Friends Like That’), “Dard-e del-e Mollā Qorbān-‘Ali” (‘Mullah Qorban-Ali’s Complaint’), “Bila dig bila čoqondar” (‘What’s Sauce for the Goose’), and “Veylān-al-Dowla” (‘Vaylan-al-Dowla’), as well as a glossary of colloquial words and phrases, which formed the nucleus of Jamalzadeh’s *Farhag-e loḡāt-e ‘āmiāna* (Dictionary of Colloquial Words, 1962, ed. Moḥammad-Ja‘far Maḥjub).

The “Preface,” in which Jamalzadeh celebrates modernity through the development of modern literary forms is noted by many critics as a literary manifesto for modernist Persian prose writing (Moayyad, 1991, p. 31; Mir‘ābedini, p. 77; Hillmann, 1988a, p. 293). It opens with a verse from the celebrated 11th century court poet [Farroki Sistāni](#) in praise of original and novel discourse, and is of considerable significance in the analysis of the



processes through which 20th century Persian literature has responded to the challenges of the modern fiction writing in the West (Daragahi, p. 104; K. Pārsinežād, pp. 60-62).

Attempting to promote what he terms as “literary democracy,” Jamalzadeh calls upon Persian writers to denounce the pretentious convoluted style of the literary elite, and instead, celebrate the aesthetic components, the democratic potentials, and the communicative power of the vernacular. Secondly, he urges them to opt for prose fiction, which, as he argues, would bring together different classes of people, and through which all kinds of propaganda can be made, political or otherwise.

In formulating these two themes, which according to him were responsible for cultural and social progress in the European countries, Jamalzadeh was not only influenced by late 19th and early 20th centuries European writers, but also by Persian journalists and writers such as Zayn-al-‘Ābedin Marāḡa’i (1837-1910), the author of *Siāḡat-nāma-ye Ebrāhim Beg* (The Travel Diaries of Ebrahim Beg, Cairo, 1895), a fictional travel narrative depicting the anarchic tyranny and backwardness of the country (I. Parsinejad, pp. 427-40), and ‘Ali Akbar Dehkodā (1879-1956), whose *Čarand parand*, written in colloquial language, in sharp contrast to the dominant literary trend and bookish style of the day, owed much of its success to being simultaneously intelligible to ordinary folk and entertaining to the intellectual elite and sophisticated men of letters (Yusofi, p. 793). He may have also been influenced by Mirza Ḥabib Eṣfahāni’s translation of James Morier’s (1782-1849) *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* (London, 1824).

“Fārsi šekar ast,” first appeared in the January 1921 issue of *Kāva* (1916-22), a reformist and nationalistic journal, published in Berlin by the noted Iranian scholar Ḥasan Taqizāda (1878-1970, q.v.). In this first-person narrative, Jamalzadeh targets one of the two main themes of the “Dibāča,” namely the language. The narrator, returning home after spending a few years in Europe, is detained at the border customs and imprisoned in a windowless warehouse together with a traditionalist mullah, a pseudo-modernist (farangi-maāb), and an ordinary salt-of-the-earth character, who neither understands the Arabic-laden Persian of the former, nor the equally incomprehensible language of the latter, which is sprinkled with French words and expressions. Jamalzadeh vividly depicts these most unlikely cellmates as social types. The Mullah’s retreat into the past, and the pseudo-modernist’s refuge in foreignness turns the narrative of the detention house into a hall of mirrors in which the Persian



society of the time, caught between the clash of inherited traditions and modern European cultures, is reflected. The story, despite long decades of developments in Persian story-telling techniques has not lost its relevance and literary appeal (Hillmann, 1988b, p. 313).

“Rajol-e siāsi,” is also a critique of the corrupt and chaotic politics in the wake of the Constitutional Revolution, bringing a taste of political power to the uneducated multitude. Sheikh Ja’far Ḥallāj, a simple wool carter, finds his way into this political environment by chance. Disappointed by what he experiences, he soon abandons politics to live a contended life in the provincial town of Nā’in.

Mollā Qorbān-‘Ali, the narrator of the next story, is a married man with deeply held religious beliefs, who falls in love with his neighbor’s young daughter. The girl dies after a fatal illness and the father asks the Mollā to recite the Qor’an at her deathbed. Finding himself alone with the corpse in the mosque, and caught in the grips of an irresistible desire, he kisses her lips. He is arrested and thrown in jail, wherein he narrates the account of his long unhappy life, without recognizing that the values which he subscribes to are the very same that deny him earthly pleasure.

The next story of the collection, “Dusti-e k̄āle k̄erse” (lit. The friendship of Auntie Bear), gets its title from a Persian saying which implies a deceitful friendship fraught with dangers. The familiar depiction of Russia as a bear turns the saying into an apt title for a story which takes place during the Russian occupation of Iran in World War I. Told by an idealist narrator, the story revolves around the unfortunate fate of Ḥabib-Allāh, an innkeeper, who tries to save the life of a wounded Russian Cossack and is shot to death by him. The narrator’s perception of the world, along with his nationalistic dreams are shattered as he watches the scene of shooting from a distance.

Jamalzadeh’s engagement with, and criticism of, the religious establishment reemerges in “Bila dig bila čoqondar,” which revolves around a conversation in a public bath between a Persian who lives in Europe and a European bath-attendant who had resided several years in Iran. The conversation, which often reminds one of some passages of *Hajji Baba of Ispahan*, displays Iran’s suffering from an oppressive elite and an entrenched clerical establishment, and highlights the obtrusive interference of the foreign powers, and the insincerity and blind arrogance of the foreign advisors (Moayyad, 1985, p. 12). Eventually, however, the exchange of memories and observations balances off



some of the nostalgic images of the Persian, and some of the hostile sarcasms of the European.

In “Veylān-al-Dowla”, the last story of the collection, Jamalzadeh sketches another social type, a ‘vagrant of realm’, who, never gets a life of his own and being nothing but a nuisance and headache for others, commits suicide (Balay and Cuypers, pp. 147). Jamalzadeh’s condensed, and yet vivid depiction of Veylān-al-Dowla’s last hours, converts the story into a drama of the life of the mind, and inspires the readers to recognize, beneath his idleness and empty boastings, the face of a human being desperate for sympathy and help.

The publication of *Yeki bud yeki nabud* caused a great stir and attracted both extravagant praise and equally strong condemnation. According to a letter by ‘Abd-al-Raḥīm Kālkāli to Jamalzadeh, dated 8 November 1922, some religious observers and their circle of followers found the book blasphemous, and an offence to the cultural, religious, and moral values (Kamshad, pp. 94-95; Katouzian, pp. 190-91; for the text of the letter see Jamalzadeh, *Šāhkār*, 2nd edition, Tehran, 1957, pp. 2-3) This reaction might have been a factor in discouraging the writer from publishing any further fiction for the next 20 years.

Among the collection’s earliest admirers was the eminent Persian scholar Moḥammad Qazvini (1877-1949). In his letter of 28 December 1922 to Jamalzadeh, he lavishly praised the simple, innovative, and flowing language of the stories as “a perfect example of present day Persian,” and commended him for demonstrating that familiarity with other cultures and languages need not result in dependence on borrowed styles and foreign loan words (Qazvini’s letter to Jamalzadeh, *Once Upon a Time*, pp. 25-29; see also Qazvini’s letter to Taqizāda, in *Az Šabā tā Nimā*, Vol. 2, p. 275). While Qazvini’s praise was focused on the language of the collection, [Arthur Christensen](#) (1875-1945), the outstanding Danish scholar of Iranian philology and folklore, along with many other critics in later years, acknowledged the book as a milestone in introducing modern techniques of fiction writing into the mainstream of Persian literature (Nikitine, p. 23; Yarshater, 1988, p. 33; Hillmann, 1976, pp. 11-13; Mir’ābedini, p. 79).

Some other critics, however, did not concur with these favorable comments. In most of the sketches of the collection, as they argue, Jamalzadeh, despite his conjectures on modern prose narratives in the ‘Preface,’ merely exploits the popular techniques of the plot-centered traditional Persian folk tales



(Kamshad, pp. 109-11), and his characters, rather than growing into real individuals with psychological and personal characteristics, are depicted as social types (Barāhani, pp. 550-561; Balay and Cuypers, pp. 147-62, 207-208). The view is not shared by other commentators, who have traced distinct personal traits in Jamalzadeh's portrayal of some of his characters/narrators who actively take part in the events of the stories. The narrators of "With Friends Like That," "Mollā Qorbān 'Ali's Complaints," and "What's Sauce for the Goose," whose worldviews are challenged by the way the stories unfold, provide telling examples (Pedersen, pp. 7-57).

Jamalzadeh's depiction of ordinary people, although, as noted by a critic, is embellished with Orientalist motifs (Navabpour, p. 72-74), illustrated the changes in the perception of the world in the early days of modern fiction and heralded a new literary sensibility. Glowing with colorful expressions and colloquialisms—although they may seem forced or artificial to the contemporary readers (Kamshad, p. 111; Moayyad and Sprachman p. 17), these witty satires depict the Persian society of the early decades of the 20th century with unprecedented realism and local color, and subject it to harsh criticism (Daragahi, p. 104; Yarshater, 1984, p. 38). More importantly, his somewhat nebulous notion of "literary democracy" has taken shape in subsequent decades and has brought in a more rounded depiction of characters of different classes and beliefs (Rahimieh, p. 22; Yavari, p. 12).

Jamalzadeh's stories, unlike the traditional tales, are situated in a particular time and place and his characters speak in their own voice and language. However, the absence of character development in some of his stories, his reluctance to adopt a more innovative approach and experiment with and exploit the very brevity and terse coherence of the short story as a distinct literary genre (Daragahi, p. 108; Mashiah, p. 110, 143), along with the light-hearted tenor of his stories and sketches (Mirṣādeqi, p. 593), might explain why, despite his status as a pioneer of modern fiction, he has not found many followers among the younger generation of writers, unlike those who immediately followed him, and most notably Sadeq [Hedayat](#) (1903-1951) and [Sadeq Chubak](#) (1916-1998).

Selected Translations:

Danish:

Arthur Christensen, "Rajol-e siāsi" *Kulturskitser fra Iran*, Copenhagen, 1931,



pp. 179-84.

English:

Mansur Heshmat Moyyad and Paul Sprachman, *Once Upon a Time*, New York, 1985)

Seyed Manoochehr Moosavi, “Fārsi šekar ast”, in Michael Hillmann, ed., *Major Voices in Contemporary Persian Literature, in Literature East and West* 20, Austin, Texas, 1976, pp. 13-20; “Dard-e del-e Mollā-Qorbān ‘Ali” *Ahang*, Delhi, April 1944.

French:

Stella Corbin and Hassan Lotfi (excluding “Fārsi šekar ast”), *Choix de Nouvelles*, UNESCO, Paris, 1959 (with an introduction by Henri Massé).

Shahin Sarkisian (abridged translation of four stories of the collection), *Journal de Teheran*, 1950.

German:

“Rajol-e siāsi” *Die Reise zum wonningen Fisch* (an anthology of humorous short stories, Austria, 1951.

Rudolf Gelpke, “Dusti-e Kāle k̄erse”, *Persische Meistererzähler der Gegenwart*, Zürich, 1961.

Russian:

B. N. Zakhoder, with some explanatory notes and a detailed preface by A. Bolotnikoff, 1936.

Urdu:

Munibur Rahman, “Dusti-e Kāle k̄erse”, *Fikr u Nazar*, 1/1, Aligrah, 1945.



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Mansur Heshmat Moayyad and Paul Sprachman, *Mohammad Ali Jamalzada: Once Upon a Time (Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud)*, New York, 1985.

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Michael C. Hillmann, "Persian Prose Fiction: An Iranian Mirror and Conscience," in Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *Persian Literature*, New York, 1988, pp. 291-317.

Idem, ed., "Major Voices in Contemporary Persian Literature", in *Literature East and West* 20, Austin, 1976.

Idem, "Once Upon a Time," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 47/4, October 1988, pp. 311-13.

Moḥammad-‘Ali Jamālzāda, Yeki bud, yeki nabud, Berlin, 1922.

Idem, *Šāhkār*, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1957.

Mohammad Ali Jazayery, "Modern Persian Prose Literature," *Journal of*



American Oriental Society 90/2, April-June 1970, pp. 257-65.

Hassan Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature*, Bethesda, Md., 1996, pp. 91-112.

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Idem, *Darbāra-ye Jamālzāda va Jamālzāda šenāsi*, Tehran, 2003.

Yaakov Mashiah, "Once Upon a Time," *Acta Orientalia* 33, 1971, pp. 109-43.

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Reza Navabpour, "The 'Writer' and the 'People': Jamalzadeh's *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud*: a Recast", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23/1, 1996, pp. 69-75.

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