



## ZARRINKUB, 'ABD-AL-ḤOSAYN

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**ZARRINKUB, 'ABD-AL-ḤOSAYN** (b. Borujerd, 19 March 1923; d. Tehran, 15 September 1999; [Figure 1](#)), prolific Iranian scholar, literary critic, literary historian, essayist, and translator.

Zarrinkub was born in [Borujerd](#) (q.v.), in Lorestān province in western Iran. His father 'Abd-al-Karim Zarrinkub originally followed in his uncle Ḥāji Moḥammad Ḥasan's footsteps and worked as a goldsmith (*zargar*), but because he considered the work "frowned upon" (*makruh*: see [ḤALĀL O ḤARĀM](#)) on religious grounds took up horticulture (*b āg bā ni*) and farming. Despite this change of occupation, he continued to be known in Borujerd as "goldsmith," so he decided to change the family name to *zarrinkub* ("golden-beater"; Afšāri). A devout man, steeped in Shi'ite theology and religious history, 'Abd-al-Karim hosted preachers, scholars of religion, and reciters of Shi'ite elegiac literature (*raw z' a-k' ā ni*, see [TA'ZIA](#)) from many parts of Iran (Zarrinkub, 1999b).

The young Zarrinkub studied the standard curriculum at the time up to the fifth year of high school in Borujerd. This included introductory lessons in French, in which – along with English – he became quite familiar on his own. At the urging of his father, he took up religious studies (*ṭalabagi*) at the Baḥr-al-'Olum seminary (known as Madrasa-ye Nurbakaš) and pursued Arabic literature with Shaikh 'Ali Javāheri (1904-95; Afšāri). With the closure of the school in 1940, he moved to Tehran to complete high school at Dabirestān-e Marvi. While in Tehran, he also studied dialectical theology (*'elm-e kal ā m*) and philosophy at two seminaries (Madrasa-ye Kān Marvi and Madrasa-ye



Moḥammadiya Bāzār). One of his teachers was 'Allāma Abu'l-Ḥasan Ša'rāni (1903-73). Ša'rāni, who taught at the Dabirestān-e Marvi and later joined the Faculty of Letters and Humanities (Dāneškada-ye adabiyāt wa 'olum-e esāni) at the University of Tehran (see [FACULTIES OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEHRAN iv](#)), may have shown the young Zarrinkub how an encyclopedic thirst for knowledge could be quenched by an understanding of foreign languages.

Zarrinkub scored highest on the nationwide college entrance examination for two faculties at the University of Tehran, Islamic Studies (Dāneškada-ye ma'qul o manqul, later Elāhiyāt, "Theology") and Letters and Humanities. Although until that time much of his formal schooling had been devoted to a clerical career, he chose the latter faculty for his undergraduate studies. His choice may have been guided by extracurricular reading.

Before entering university, Zarrinkub had become familiar with the writing of the British philosopher, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) and had read James Frazer's (1854-1941) *The Golden Bough* (Afšāri). Through Spencer, whom Zarrinkub describes as "thoroughly engrossed in the sciences" (Zarrinkub, 1975, II, p. 751), he was exposed to the application of Darwinism and the theory of thermodynamics to the study of society; and, with Frazer's book, he encountered the most influential 20th century work on religious belief from a comparative point of view.

In 1941, having finished the last year of high school in Tehran, Zarrinkub returned to Borujerd and taught Persian literature, history, geography, and foreign languages at high schools in that city and in Korramābād, capital of Lorestān province. Zarrinkub's teaching did not seem to interfere with his study of literature. The fruit of what must have been an intense period of reading and research was his first published book *Falsafa-ye š e' r yā tā riḳ-e taṭawwor-e š e' r va š ā'eri* (The philosophy of poetry or the history of the development of poetry and being a poet; 1944). In his *Naqd-e adabi* (Literary criticism), a comprehensive survey of literature and literary criticism based on original source materials in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and several European languages, Zarrinkub (1975, II, p. 754) notes that *Falsafa-ye š e' r* was written when Darwin and Spencer influenced his thinking about the genesis of literary expression. [Parviz Khanlari](#) (q.v.), at the time a newly appointed assistant professor of literature at the University of Tehran and editor of the literary journal *Sokan* reviewed Zarrinkub's book. Khanlari noted the inventive ways an unknown in the field of literary criticism (a prospective undergraduate, no less) used sources in Western languages to



discuss Persian poetry, but he criticized him for presenting the results of his study without notes and references (p. 629). Khanlari was to prove one of Zarrinkub's staunchest advocates in the world of letters. He also introduced his young protégé to the eminent novelist, essayist, and scholar Şādeq Hedāyat (q.v.; Rastegār Fasā'i, pp. 64-65).

In 1945, Zarrinkub enrolled in the Faculty of Letters and Humanities and graduated three years later. During that time, he also taught in high schools in Tehran and started reading through the holdings of the capital's research libraries. Zarrinkub was admitted to the doctoral program at the University of Tehran in 1949. According to Iraj Afšār (1999, p. 11), Zarrinkub had little use for his classes, preferring instead to engage literature in more meaningful and skillful ways than his professors. While an undergraduate and during his graduate studies (1948-1955), he was the editor of the weekly *Mehreg ān*, the organ of graduates of the Teacher Training College (see JĀME' A-YE LISĀNSIAHĀ-YE DĀNEŠ-SARĀ-E 'ĀLI), founded by Moḥammad Derakḡšeš in 1948. The initial parts of Zarrinkub's first book, *Do qarn sokut* (Two centuries of silence; 1951), a book on Iranian cultural and literary life after the Arab invasion of Iran which achieved remarkable success, and he considered it his favorite work (Āyati, p. 46), were serialized as marginalia to the main articles in *Mehreg ān*.

Zarrinkub was also active as a translator during this period. *Fan-e šer*, his translation of Aristotles' *Peri poietik ē s* ("Poetics"), appeared in 1958. The following year he translated two books by Verdun-Léon Saulnier (1917-1980), *La littérature française du moyen âge: des origins à 1500* and *La littérature française de la renaissance*, later combined into a single Persian volume called *Adabiy āt-e farānsa dar qorun-e woštā va ronessāns* (French literature in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance). Seven years after completing his undergraduate studies, Zarrinkub finished his Ph.D. dissertation, a general study of literary criticism (1952).

Zarrinkub began teaching at the Faculty of Islamic Studies, which, given his interests, was not the right place for him. Fortunately, he became acquainted with the liberal statesman, Sayyed Ḥasan Taqizadeh (q.v.), who arranged Zarrinkub's access to the Majles Library (The Parliamentary Library of Iran). An eight-year post-graduate "fellowship" ensued, during which Zarrinkub read through library's holdings on history and literature in Middle Eastern and European languages (Afšār, 1999, p. 12). Armed with a working knowledge of English, French, and German, Zarrinkub digested many



articles in, and sources of, the first and second editions of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (q.v.). Having made the most of his independent study fellowship, Zarrinkub developed an expertise in a variety of subjects pertaining to Iran. In the 1960s and 1970s, in addition to his academic and scholarly activities, he edited and wrote for *Dāyerat al-ma'āref-e fārsi* (q.v.), the first truly modern Persian language encyclopedia, which was partly based on the *Columbia Viking Desk Encyclopedia*. The introduction to the first volume of *D āyerat al-ma'āref-e fārsi* (pp. 51-53), which came out in 1966 under the general editorship of Gholam-Hosayn Mosaheb (q.v.), quotes Zarrinkub's assessment of primary sources for Iranian history in the post-Islamic period. The extent of Zarrinkub's learning is reflected in his original contributions to *D āyerat al-ma'āref-e fārsi*, which, because they dealt with Iranian studies, were beyond the scope of the English version. Other products of Zarrinkub's erudition are articles and book reviews published in periodicals of the time. Some of these were compiled in *Yāddāst-hā va andišā-hā* (Notes and thoughts; 1972). The book's preface contains an annotated bibliography of 160 books, articles, and translations Zarrinkub published before 1972. *Nah šarqi, nah ġarbi – ensāni* (Neither eastern, nor western – human; 1974) is another major compilation, the title of which refers to the obsessive concern among some intellectuals about what the West thinks of Iran.

At the end of the 1960s, Zarrinkub's dim view of what happened in Iran after the Muslim conquest, which was first aired in *Do qarn sokut*, changed. The title reflects his understanding that the coming of the Arabs and Islam to Iran initiated a period of dormancy, during which almost all traces of Iran's literary heritage were overwritten or erased, Arabic became the language of government while Persian went mute, and Zoroastrianism gave way to Islam. The publication of *Kār-nāma-ye Eslām* (The Record of Islam; 1975) marked an abrupt departure from his low opinion of the Arab invaders, their language, and the change of religion. As Siāvaš Šohāni (p. 177) points out, *Kār-nāma-ye Eslām* contradicts every assertion Zarrinkub made about Arabs and Islam in *Do qarn sokut*. Arabs were no longer uncivilized desert-dwellers dependent on Iran for their material needs, and Arabic was no longer "drier and more sterile than the scorching desert sands" (Zarrinkub, 1957, p.110). Instead of ill-treating the conquered peoples, in *Kār-nāma-ye Eslām* Arabs showed "compassion and tolerance" (*tas āmoḥ*). Islam was no longer a religion spread by the sword and the lash, but a world faith that transcended tribal, ethnic, and national allegiances. The way Zarrinkub spoke about the Qur'an also



changed markedly; at one point in *Do qarn sokut* (Zarrinkub, 1957, pp. 114-15), he had written, “Convinced their scripture was the only true guide for humanity, the Arabs used it to justify burning all books they found in the libraries of Iran.” The Qur’an in *Kār-nāma-ye Eslām* was full of esoteric import clear to all able to get beyond the literal meaning of the text.

Zarrinkub’s changing view of the Qur’an was evident before 1975 in biographies he wrote about two major Iranian figures: one of the greatest Persian poets, [Hafez](#) (q.v.), and the theologian, jurist, and mystic [Abu Ḥāmed Moḥammad Ġazāli](#) (q.v.). In his study of Hafez, Zarrinkub (1970, pp. 31-32) writes that had the poet been an ordinary student of the Qur’an, he would have spent his professional life as a reciter or copyist of scripture. Hafez’s restless genius, however, prevented his search for wisdom from ending at the text; meditation (*tadabbor*) on the Qur’an opened the young man up to flashes of insights from the heart (*esrāqāt-e qalbi*), what Zarrinkub (1970, p. 32) describes as super-sensory glimpses of the hidden world (*donyā-ye ḡayb*). In *Farār az madrasa* (Escape from the madrasa; 1974a), pondering of the deeper meaning of the Qur’an causes Ġazāli’s to abandon the comfort and prestige of a professorship and to venture into the unreason of mysticism. The esoteric meaning of the Qur’an affected the master theologian-jurist the way it did Hafez; it taught him not to rely solely on pure reason to obtain certainty, but to discover it in flashes of insight fueled by the heart. According to Zarrinkub (1974a, p. 158), Ġazāli’s “hunger for investigation lasted until the end of his life,” which is an apt epitaph for the author himself.

Unlike Ġazāli, Zarrinkub stayed in academia and, despite failing health, continued to mentor students and edit and contribute to many scholarly publications. His works remained so popular after the 1979 Islamic Revolution that publishers avidly welcomed new writing or repackaged previous collections of his essays. Towards the end of his life, ‘Elmi publishers brought out a flurry of Zarrinkub’s oeuvre: compilations of articles, commentaries on comparative and narrative literature, biographies of major figures in poetry, philosophy and theology, and, in 1999, *Serr-e ney* (The secret of the reed), a two-volume critical and comparative analysis of [Jalāl-al-Din Rumi](#)’s (q.v.) *Maṭnawi*.

The popularity of Zarrinkub’s writing did not exempt it from government meddling. In 1999, censors refused to allow the republication of *Do qarn sokut* unless it contained a foreword excerpted from Ayatollah Morteżā Moṭahhari’s (1919-1979) *Ḳadamāt-e motaqābel-e Irān va eslām* (Mutual



services between Iran and Islam; 1970, pp. 583-90), which is harshly critical of intellectuals who longed for a return to a pre-Islamic past.

Zarrinkub's much-publicized change of attitude toward the coming of Islam to Iran did not shield him from attack. In the summer of 1996, the controversial television program *Hoviyat* (Identity) identified Zarrinkub as one influential figure in a long line of Iranian "pseudo-intellectuals" (*šebh-e rowšanfekrān*) who mounted a "cultural assault" (*šabikun-e farhangi*) on Islam ("Zarrinkub, Sa'id Emāmi, va Hoviyat"). The aspersions continued after Zarrinkub died; in an interview, Šahriār Zaršenās linked him with a Masonic (see [FREEMASONRY](#)) conspiracy to portray "tolerance" (*tas āmoḥ*) as an ancient value, basic to Iranian identity. Without naming it, Zaršenās relies on Zarrinkub's essay "Čeguna mitavān irāni bud? Čeguna mitavān irāni nabud" (How can one be Iranian? How can one not be Iranian?; Zarrinkub, 1974b, pp. 40-47), which praises Iranians for, among many things, not drowning the world in blood or setting fire to it in the name of religion or liberty; for not, having been conquered, massacring their enemies or taking them prisoner; for not setting up inquisition tribunals like the ones in medieval Europe; for not staging gory spectacles with infuriated bulls as means of public amusement; and for not inventing hellish torments for their opponents. In Zaršenās's view, the crypto-Freemason Zarrinkub undermined Islam by portraying it as superstition, thereby depriving Iranians of their identity and making them susceptible to neocolonialism. Contrary to the author's claim of being "moderate" (*mo 'tadel*) and "balanced" (*mota' ādel*), Zaršenās says scrutiny of Zarrinkub's books and SAVAK (Sāzmān-e Eṭṭelā'āt wa Amniyat-e Kešvar, "National intelligence and security organization") documents reveal him to be a masonic secularizer. This view stems partly from a nativism that suspects Iranian intellectuals influenced by or educated in the West of being witting or unwitting agents of first world imperialism. Opinion on Zarrinkub's intellectual legacy has not been completely damning. In an article published online (2004), the historian-cleric 'Ali Abu'l-Ḥasani, known as "Monḍer" (1955-2012), lists Zarrinkub among the Pahlavi-era scholars enlisted in the effort "to attack Islam and sanctify ancient Iran" (*ḥamla be-esl ām va taqdis-e Irān-e bāstān*). The goal of this was to legitimize the monarchy while weakening the power of the clergy. Unlike others, however, Abu'l-Ḥasani praises Zarrinkub for seeing the error of his early writing. He recognizes two stages in Zarrinkub's rehabilitation: the courageous (*dalir āna*) admission he made in the introduction to the second edition of *Do qarn sokut* and the more important step of writing the estimable



(*ger ā n-sang*) book *Kār-nāma-ye eslām*.

Zarrinkub was familiar with modern historiographical trends and the works of European scholars of Iran, and showed considerable inventiveness in the use of sources, but as Fakhreddin Azimi points out (p. 419), did not always observe his own injunction regarding the necessity of a steadily critical assessment of them. His prose style was also sometimes clearly influenced, in an oddly mimetic manner, by the source he used. This idiosyncrasy is particularly evident in one of his later and more distinctly historical works, the ambitiously titled *Tāriḳ-e mardom-e Irān* (The history of the Iranian people; 1985).

A profoundly modest man, Zarrinkub eschewed titles and honors amassed over a remarkably long scholarly life. In addition to his academic positions, he was chief editor of several important periodicals including the influential literary and book review journal, *R ā hnamā -ye ketā b* (1963-64). Many of his articles and books are considered the last word on aspects of Persian literary history, comparative literature, Iranian music and folklore, and Sufism.

Zarrinkub's life partner was Qamar Āriān (1922-2012), a noted scholar in her own right. They first met at the University of Tehran while both were students and married in 1953. They had no children and bequeathed their works and personal library to the Markaz-e Dāyerat al-ma'āref-e bozorg-e eslāmi (Center for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia).

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