

# Modern Revolutionist Writer: Bozorg Alavi

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Bozorg Alavi was an influential Iranian short story writer, novelist and political activist. He became a great name in Persian literature and Iranian political circuit. He is one of the most famous Iranian writers of his time, who had leftist leanings.

Alavi was born in Tehran in 1904 C.E, into a wealthy merchant family. Both his father and grandfather were active supporters of the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11. His grandfather was a member of parliament. His father Murtaza Alavi, opposed the British and Russian presence in Iran. During the World War-I he fled to Germany, where he became one of the founders of the Iranian exile Journal 'Kaveh'. In 1921 C.E, Alavi and his elder brother joined their father in Germany, to continue their education. He finished high school there and completed the equivalent of a B.A. at the University of Munich.

Alavi returned to Iran in 1928 and initially taught at a technical school in Shiraz. He joined the faculty of a German technical high school in Tehran during 1931 C.E. At this school he became acquainted with several other foreign educated Iranians, especially Dr.Taqi Arani and he eventually joined Arani's weekly study circle, which read and discussed the works of European Marxists and Socialists. The members of Arani group gradually expanded and in 1937 C.E the police arrested 53 men, whom they charged with forming an illegal communist party. All were sentenced, with Alavi receiving a seven year prison term.

Arani died in prison, but Alavi and the others were freed in 1941 C.E, following the joint Anglo-Soviet invasion and occupation of Iran. Alavi himself claimed that he was not involved politically at the time and simply was in a group of literati, who among other things read communist writings.

Upon his release he published his '*Varaq Pareh-ha-ye-Zendan*', and '*Panjah-o seh Nafar*', and continued his political activities, becoming a founding member of the Communist Tudeh Party of Iran and serving as editor of its publication '*Mardom*'. Alavi was in Germany when the 1954 coup d'état overthrew the government of Mohammad Mossadegh and resulted in massive arrests and imprisonment. Alavi stayed in exile in East Berlin, teaching at Humboldt University, until the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty and the 1979 C.E Islamic revolution.

In the early years of 1979 C.E he returned briefly to Iran after 25 years in exile and was warmly received by the Iranian Writers Association, including some of the prominent contemporary writers/poets as Ahmad Shamlu, Mahmud Daulatabadi, Siavash Kasraie and others. After several brief visits to his homeland he permanently settled in Berlin, where he died in 1997 C.E.

Throughout his illustrious career he advocated a committed literature for the service of political ideology, dedicated to the masses. According to him the duty of the writer is to lead the people, since he is in the best position to point out what the masses cannot clearly express themselves. That's why he rose to fame with only a few compositions unlike his predecessors. He plays an outstanding role in disclosing the better facts about Reza Shah's reign. For these reasons from 1953 to 1978 his books were not allowed to be published in Iran.

His major published works consist of three collections of short stories: '*Varaq-Pariha-ye Zindan*' (1941 C.E), '*Chamedan*' (1934 C.E) and '*Name-ha*' (1952 C.E) and a novel '*Chashmhayash*' (1952 C.E). Just prior to going to jail

he published his first collection of short stories called 'Chamedan'. The Freudian influences, which Alavi brought with him from Germany is seen in this collection abundantly. Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalysis played a vital role in Alavi's writing and remained a predominant part of Alavi's short stories. 'Chamedan' is a collection of six short stories. In 'Arus-e HazarDamad' Alavi is influenced by Hafiz

famous couplet:

مجودرستی عهد از جهان سست نهاد  
کاین عجوزه عروس هزار داماداست

It is a story of a violinist who is in love with a girl called Susan who is a singer by profession. The story takes place in a modern European style night-club, which was in a large number in Tehran itself in those days. The violinist is inspired or fascinated by a song sung by the girl, Susan. He went to Europe to pursue music classes there and becomes master of this art. After some time, he returns to Iran and marries this girl who was his source of inspiration. Gradually he is fed up of the girl and her songs and they separated. A year later or so they meet again, and now Susan becomes Suski and she sings the old song: a line from Hafiz couplet. When they are dancing to a mad tune the memory of past is revived in girl's mind and in a fit of rage she smashes the musician's violin. Though there is nothing new in it but the depiction of the scene and the atmosphere of night club in portrayed superbly by Bozorg Alavi.

'Sarbaz-e Surbi' is a story of an opium addict, who is also a minor civil servant. He is an impotent opium addicted his character is displayed by Bozorg Alavi in a very negative way. He loves a housemaid but he is very suspicious and jealous by nature. In the end of the story he strangles her because of his suspicion, jealousy and bad temper. The beginning and the end of the story is very significant because beginning and the end of the story opens in bus, with the writer telling us that we can see the true life of ordinary men/women in a bus journey. He learnt more in these buses than in his ten years of school life. Also the story



closes in similar situation on a bus ride, as though nothing unusual had happened in between these years. It targets various social problems like opium addiction, sexual frustration, immoral deeds, jealousy, suspicion and hatred.

The other story of his collection is '*Chamedan*' the story of the; love of a father and his son for a white Russian girl called Katushka. '*Qurbani*' is the other short story of this collection in which Bozorg Alavi's negative characters reappear. It is a story of a sensitive and talented young man who is suffering from tuberculosis. At last he marries the girl who is found of him. While they are on their honeymoon he commits suicide. It has a tragic end and shows the plight and pathos of a young man who is fed up of his life and wants to commit suicide.

'*Tarikhcha-ye Utaq-e Man*' is an exciting short story of Bozorg Alavi. It has all the ingredients of a good story like a suspicious and infidel husband, young and attractive wife, a young lover and a murder scene like today's Hindi cinema. The title of the story is very symbolic and it depicts the society of Iran in 1940s.

'*Mardi-ke Paltu-ye Shik Tanash Bud*' is a very humorous and satirical work of Bozorg Alavi. It ridicules the modern English or French-fried intellectuals, who have just returned from Europe. It has the same theme as Jamalzadeh's '*farsishikarast*' and Sadeq Hedayat's '*VaghVagh Sahib*'. Alavi ridicules those fellow Iranians who have forgotten their own culture and their dress, language, way of speaking are all affected by Western style. He finds them funny and artificial, implying to the readers that an overdose of Western culture is ridiculous and artificial.

The second collection of Alavi's short stories. '*Varaqpariha ye Zindan*' which was published just after his release from prison after four years in 1941 C.E is a collection of short narratives. Majority of his short stories in this collection are inspired by political and factional aspirations. It may have been due to his wandering life that before his death he expressed regret for having resorted to factional slogans

during that dark and suffocating period of the Iranian history. In his dialogue with Shafie Kadkani (Donyay-e-Sokhan,1997), Bozorg Alavi said that, politics caused him to loose his path. In this collection, he refers to the clash of the youth with the despotic system in Iran. As the name suggests, these are tales of the co-prisoners on scrap papers but the charm of Bozorg

Alavi is evident in these stories. As Kamshad rightly observed:

"The musical quality of the language is one of this book's most haunting features. The brilliant character study and the abundance of images surpass those of the first work and show vividly how much the artist has refined his craft. Despite the political bias that colours nearly all the stories, here, too, psychological probing is a major theme."1

Other stories like '*Patang*', '*Sitara-ye Dunbala-dar*', '*Intizar Afv-e Umumi*', '*Raqs-e Marg*' of this collection have the same thrust: revolt against dictatorship and despotic rule. In '*Patang*' he acquaints us with the plight of poor farmers in the northern provinces of Iran. It also has a good deal of criticism on the later years of Reza Shah's reign. Unsuccessful marriage, revenge, murder and jealousy are some of the topics chosen for this collection. '*Sitara-ye Dunhaledar*' is a heart touching story of a political prisoner who is quite young and has been arrested on his wedding day. The narration of the story is strong and the reader feels that compassion and sympathy for the young man and grieves with him. '*Intizar*' is a pathetic story of Alavi's fellow prisoner who becomes mad in his prison cell. It is narrated with fantastic conviction and with great maturity. '*Afv-e Umumi*' is a nostalgic tale of a political prisoner who writes to his young wife about his life in prison, where all kinds of miseries are inflicted upon him. The sadness, the gloom and the desperation of a confined life is captured with a sensitivity which is the characteristics of Alavi. His realistic comments on the sufferings of his fellow prisoners

are quite heart touching. Kamshad translated in his own words some paragraph of his work 'Afv-e

*Umumi*' that:

"The greatest affliction is not that all  
contact with the world is cut off but the  
greatest misfortune and affliction is that  
even within this limited environment one is not free"<sup>2</sup>

In '*Raqs-e Marg*' Bozorg Alavi is at his best. His strong narration, flight of imagination and the tender and humane treatment of the plot has made this story unforgettable. The story is told like a love story and there is a murder at the end, but it is narrated by Alavi, with a view to emphasize the worthlessness of this life and the inevitability of this in the entire story '*marg*', '*murda*' '*ustekhawan*' are used allegorically:

”از دیروز صبح تا بحال آهنگ های ’رقص مرگ‘ در گوش من صدا می کند مرتضی دست رجب علی رجبوف را گرفته در نیمه شب از قبر بیرون می آیند، مرده دیگری باقلم دست دختری روی جمجمه جوانی آهنگ های مهیب ’رقص مرگ‘ را می نوازند، قبرها دهن باز می کنند. استخوان بندی ها از گوریرون می آیند و دسته جمعی سرود مرگ را می خوانند و پای می کوبند. مار گریتا باصورت تیر کشیده اش، اما زنده تماشا می کند او فقط می خواهد مرتضی را ازین رقص دسته جمعی بیرون بکشد.“

The next collection, though not of stories but narrative of Bozorg Alavi is '*Panjah--wa-se Nafar*'. It is powerful account of his trial and other fifty two people of Dr.Taqi Arani's group. The police arrested them and charged with forming an illegal communist party. It is a real story of the agony and maltreatment they suffered from the jail wardens, the despotic rules of the government officials, their struggle for survival, their trial etc. It was published during the political turmoil of the 1941 when Reza Shah Pahlavi was departed. This collection had a tremendous impact on the minds of readers especially on the youth of Iran at that time.

His collection '*Name-ha*' has nine short stories in it. The first one is '*Name-ha*' and is the story of a judge's daughter Shirin who has joined a progressive revolutionary group. Her father is a corrupt judge. Shirin sends him anonymous letter about



his past crime. He has freed several hard-core criminals by taking bribes, and now his own past is haunting him. It is an allegorical representation of self-trial.

The story '*Gila-Mard*' is no doubt one of the finest short stories of this collection and one of the best by a Persian author. The story is against the feudal system of Iran. It is the story of a Gilanian farmer who is arrested by two armed commandos because he is involved in anti-feudalism protests. They are taking him to their headquarters. One of the commandos takes fifth tumours from the *Gila-Mard* returns his pistol to *Gila-Mard*, and creeps quietly away. In the course of time he escapes from the custody of the commanders but eventually is shot dead by one of them. The trauma and pathos of the farmer are depicted by Alavi are quite remarkable. It also shows the feudal mind set of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran and how the poor labourers and farmers were tormented by the feudal lords from centuries.

'*Ijara-ye Khana*' is a pathetic story of a poor family who is killed when the roof of their house collapses. '*Diz-ashub*' is story of a poor father who spends his last penny on the upbringing and education of his only daughter. But after the completion of her training she forgets all about her father's sacrifices and chooses the more attractively life of urban society. It also slows the ill effects of westernization on Iranian youth. '*Yak Zan-e Khushbakht*' and '*Rusavi*' show the target compulsory marriages, that are forced by parents and also highlights the scandals of high society, their illegal affairs, bearing illegitimate child and other social corruption which were prevailing in the Iranian society of 1940s. The last story of this collection '*Panj Daqiqa Pas-as Davazdeh*' is a satire, exposing the corruption in Persian administrative hierarchy.

Bozorg Alavi is one of the most popular socialist writers of Iran who had propagated Marxist ideals in his short stories and writings and even



today he stands out as Iran's highly acclaimed progressive writer.

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