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## Ali Akbar Dehkhodā: Literary Accomplishments and Religious Reforms of *Sur-e Esrafil*<sup>1</sup>

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Ali Akbar Dehkhodā (1879–1956) a gifted linguist and well-known constitutionalist, is primarily remembered for his extensive Persian language lexicon, *Loghatnameh*, published in the mid 20th century. In fact, he was a true renaissance man who was well-versed in a number of fields and pioneered a dramatic number of discourses in the early 20th century. Dehkhoda was an intellectual with a classical and a Shi'i

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Islamic education, a former diplomat, a poet and wordsmith, a social democrat activist, and polemicist, an early advocate of women's rights, and a journalist with a deadline, among others.

In the early years of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906-11), Dehkhodā began contributing to the weekly social democratic paper *Sur-e Esrāfil* (henceforth *SE*). He published a series of satirical columns under the title *Charand-o Parand* and penned a number of editorials. *Sur-e Esrāfil* (henceforth *SE*) refers to the trumpet call of the archangel (Qur'an 18:99; the "last trump" of I Corinthians 15:52 and Handel's *Messiah*), to be sounded on the day of bodily resurrection, when humankind is to answer for their deeds in this world.

*SE* began publication in 1907, ten months after the August 1906 revolution. The eight- to ten-page weekly paper was issued on Thursdays (the day before the Friday weekend). As with other popular newspapers of the period, a few hours after it appeared, each issue was sold and resold and the contents shared by thousands of literate, semiliterate, and even illiterate citizens. The masthead of the paper, "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity," is an obvious reference to the 1789 French Revolution, though the paper's ideology was a mix of liberal, populist, and socialist positions.

The borders between Iran and the Caucasus and Central Asia were quite porous in this period and there was a great deal of interaction between the Shi'i/Azeri speaking population of Iranian Azerbaijan and the region that today includes the republics of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia. Many, if not all Azeri intellectuals were trilingual. They spoke Azeri, Persian and Russian and often also communicated in Armenian and Georgian languages. There was also a great deal of economic interaction across the border among merchants of cities such as Tabriz, Baku, and Tiflis (Tbilisi) and Iranian peasants who became seasonal workers in the oil fields of Baku.

These ties influenced intellectual and discursive exchanges across the border. Of these the social democratic newspaper *Mollā Nasreddin*, which had begun publication in Tiflis in 1906, had a significant influence on *SE*. Crucially, the Russian rulers (since 1800) were nominally committed to supporting the modernist, liberal, and secularist aspirations of the *Mollā Nasreddin* and its readers, and though their suspicions of Pan-Turkist plots did lead them to censor or close the journal at times. It survived

of Persian Learning: Testing the Limits of a Eurasian Lingua Franca, 1600-1900. A more detailed discussion of these issues will appear in our forthcoming translation of Ali Akbar De-

hkhodā's classic. See Janet Afary and John R. Perry (eds.), *Charand-o Parand: Revolutionary Satire from Iran, 1907-1909* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

well into the Soviet period. In Iran, the vacillating Qajar establishment, resisting intermittent pressure from European diplomats to liberalize, tried desperately to stop *Mollā Nasreddin* from crossing the border, and eventually clamped down and silenced the constitutionalists and their loudest voice *SE*.

Both the editor of *Mollā Nasreddin* Jalil Mammed-Qolizādeh (d. 1932), and the poet and satirist Ali Akbar Taherzādeh Sāber (d. 1911) knew Persian and belonged to Shi'i and Azeri-speaking families with deep roots in Iran. Qolizadeh moved to Tabriz after the Bolshevik Revolution, and briefly published *Mollā Nasreddin* in that city. Sāber had traveled to Iran in his youth. A third member of the editorial staff, Mohammad Sa'id Ordubādi, a socialist playwright, later joined the Iranian civil war of 1908-1909 and wrote a novel about his experience. So the relationship was extremely close and there were extensive cultural and political exchanges between *MN* and *SE* as the two bantered back and forth on major issues of the time.

Despite their many common interests and similarities in tactics, *Mollā Nasreddin* and *Sur-e Esrāfil* were quite different in several respects. From the outset, the Tbilisi paper was strikingly modern-looking, with its cover and content in both Arabic and Cyrillic scripts, and abounding in color and illustrations. It specialized in humorous cartoons, skillfully drawn and mostly in color, appealing to the illiterate as well as the educated public. Its Tehran counterpart *SE* was in black-and-white, written in uncompromising lines of Arabic script with only the masthead offering a patch of calligraphy and illustration. Whereas *Mollā Nasreddin*, written in Turkish, the vernacular and/or literary medium of most of the Ottoman realms, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, became "the satirical journal for the whole Muslim East." [FN] *SE* in Persian was more restricted territorially. Persian was still widely read in Afghanistan, India, and Central Asia, and the journal was of great interest to Iranians of all classes, sex, and religion and residents of the South Caucasus familiar with Persian.

Like *Mollā Nasreddin*, *SE* adopted an uncompromising anticolonialist position and routinely commented on the machinations of Western diplomats in Iran, specifically those of Russia and Great Britain. *SE* was also critical of the new monarch, Mohammad-Ali Shah (r. 1907–9), who took the reins after the death of his father in January 1907 and immediately began a relentless battle against the new constitutional order. Both journals supported women's rights, though *MN* was by far more outspoken in this area with its graphic caricatures.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>For some of the differences in their gender discourses, including same-sex relations, see Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge UP, 2009), 134-141.

In Iran, *SE* stood out for initiating a new discourse that combined elements from the French Enlightenment and European social democracy. It freely referenced icons of Western liberalism such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and also dabbled in contemporary European discussions on social democracy. *SE* initiated an epistemological debate on concepts such as knowledge ('*elm*') and freedom (*āzādi*). The paper routinely discussed tenets of social democracy, such as greater respect for the labor and dignity of workers and peasants. It called for the free distribution of crown and waqf (religious endowment) lands and the sale to the peasants who tilled it of land owned by major landowners. Dehkhodā and *SE*'s other writers called upon the Majlis deputies to set up a national bank that would facilitate such an agenda, by purchasing the land of major landlords and distributing it among the cultivators. The paper also called for an eight-hour workday, free education, and universal suffrage for both men and women.

But the paper reserved by far its harshest criticisms for the clerical establishment, both the lowest-ranking members of the caste of mullas, who were blamed for propagating ignorance and superstition, and those belonging to the highest echelons (*mojtaheds*), such as Shaykh Fazlollāh Nuri, who had openly sided with the anticonstitutionalist faction.

The literary accomplishments of *SE* remains highly underestimated to this day. We have tried to remedy this situation by translating Dehkhoda's columns in its entirety into English in a volume that will appear under the title *Charand-o Parand* (Stuff and Nonsense) in May 2016. This translation hopefully alerts a new generation of scholars of modern Iran to the immense accomplishments of Dehkhodā.<sup>3</sup> Our work should be of interest to both Persian and non-Persian speakers, since we have attempted to explain the many ambiguities of the text, the puns, the allusions, and the myriad historical references that were aimed at an Iranian audience of more than a century ago and are often not appreciated by the contemporary reader.

By drawing parallels between Persian proverbs or folkloric witticisms and the contemporary situation, Dehkhodā broke with the ornate and abstruse style of Persian literature and discussed complicated political issues of the time in an easily

<sup>3</sup>These columns have been reprinted several times in Tehran and we have benefited from these Persian editions, especially the notes in the 1980 annotated edition of *Dehkhodā's Maqālāt* (articles and columns) by Mohammad Dabirsiāqi. Dabirsiāqi glosses many of the historical

references and some generally well-known idioms (we have cited only notes in the first impression of his book (Faridun Elmi, 1358/1980)), his apparatus omits many of the more obscure allusions and colloquialisms.

accessible language. No one was excused. Not the despotic shah and the royal elite, who lived extravagant lifestyles (“[The Shah on the Warpath],” *SE* no. 32), nor the clerics who labeled as blasphemy any reform or innovation in the law (“[Religion for the Elite, Religion for the Masses],” no. 14), nor the simple peasants and illiterate mothers who, despite a lot little better than slavery, perpetuated the superstitions and acquiesced in the injustices that reinforced their bondage (“Reply to Letter,” no. 11; “Reply from the Newspaper,” no. 13).

Primarily because of the popularity of the *Charand-o Parand* columns, *SE* became a harbinger of modern journalism in Iran. At this time, *Revue du monde musulman* translated some of the essays into French and called it “the most literary, the best written, the best composed, and the most vehement of the newspapers that appear in Iran today.”<sup>4</sup> Edward Granville (“E. G”) Browne, the Cambridge scholar of Persian and vociferous supporter of the Constitutional Revolution, called *Charand-o Parand* “the best specimen of literary satire in Persian,” and published his English translations of five extracts (from *SE* nos. 1, 2, 4, 17 and 24) in his *Literary History and Press and Poetry of Modern Persia*. These accolades continued decades after the demise of the paper. Sorour Soroudi write that classical Persian literature had provided few examples of social satire, and when it did their scope was limited. In contrast, Dehkhodā’s satirical columns “form a turning point in the literary history of Iran in both their content and style.” Likewise, Touraj Atabaki wrote recently that *SE* was the first Iranian newspaper to understand the dual meaning of modernity, “self-determination of the individual and critical thinking.” Several critics have expressed the view that Dehkhodā’s prose works form a bridge between journalism and the modern short story in Persian.

### Challenges in Translation

The phrase *charand-o parand* has a range of meanings, from the neutral or condescending “(idle) chit-chat, prattle” to the skeptical, dismissive, or indignant “bull, balderdash, stuff and nonsense.” Etymologically, it derives from the Persian participles for “grazing” and “flying”; Steingass’s *Persian–English Dictionary* of 1892 glosses it only as “beasts and birds,” which—coincidentally or not—brings to mind the English phrase “cock and bull” or the American “horsefeathers.”

Browne’s translation of the title, “charivari,” boldly goes beyond dictionary synonyms to between-the-lines interpretation. His word is originally the French expression (in US English, “shivaree”) for a noisy folk ritual of late medieval to early modern times, in which a community expressed its disapproval of an inappropriate marriage or other social infraction with satirical songs and jests. Le Charivari was the apt title

of a Paris satirical newspaper famous for its political cartoons (1832–1937), and the English humorous weekly *Punch* appeared in 1841 with the subtitle “The London Charivari.”<sup>4</sup> Quite consciously, *SE* and its impertinent “prattle” declared themselves the scions of a venerable line of middle-class troublemakers.

Cultural differences are of course the chief source of problems and misjudgments in a translation. And when cultural norms or shibboleths are themselves the target of satire, the translator (or the reader) is virtually predestined to lose, or at least blunt, the point of the barb. The historical hiatus mentioned above adds to the usual cultural challenges of translation. Dehkhodā’s determination to write in the living language rather than the timeworn molds of classical Persian introduced into literary Persian a host of colloquial idioms. Spoken Persian has changed at least as much as colloquial English in the course of the past century, so that Dehkhod’s up-to-the-minute forms and meanings of 1907–9 are not always recognizable, or have subtly shifted in connotation, in the Persian of today. A parallel may be seen in his contemporary E. G. Browne’s English translations of *Charand-o Parand* columns, one of which we included untouched in our text (see *SE* no. 17). Browne’s Edwardian “toil and moil,” for instance, sounds quaint to modern ears, just as Dehkhodā’s phrase *charand-o parand* is no longer the Persian idiom of choice (any more than are “twaddle” or “balderdash” in English) to dismiss someone’s discourse as nonsensical, irrelevant, or deceptive. Below we provide an example of challenges we faced.

An instance here is the stock Persian phrase *din raft*, “religion has gone (away),” as repeated by Muslims at numerous junctures where conventional morality is flouted in the story told by the country boy Āzād Khan Kerendi in *SE* no. 6. At the time of the Constitutional Revolution, conservatives also used the expression to criticize the progressive views of their opponents. The English cultural equivalent of this universal grouse (and the real meaning of the Persian phrase, unknown to Āzād Khan)—that people are not as honest, kind, modest, reliable, and so on, as they used to be—would be “religion is dead” or (depending on context) “God has forsaken us.” But neither of these translations will work in every case, for several reasons. First, the base meaning of *raft* is “went, has gone (away), disappeared”: contextual connotations such as “died, is dead” or “(has) left, deserted (us)” will sometimes ring false. Then, upper-

<sup>4</sup>Dehkhodā, in one place where he explicitly connects the Persian idiom with the title of his columns (just before quoting the text of the shah’s letter to the clerics of Najaf), appeals to his readers to “judge whether I have ever in all my life written such balderdash, or whether you

have ever read the like”—implying that serious criticism underlies his own brand of chitchat, while the real *charand-o parand* is the illogical and tendentious verbiage of the shah (“The Speech of Kings Is the King of Speeches,” *SE*, year 2, no. 1).

most in the context of the story is that religion (*din*) for Āzād Khan is a mysterious something that his sketchy schooling has taught him he must possess in order not to end up in hell. His naïve accounts of half-understood experiences as a waif astray in the city (into which Dehkhodā, of course, injects clues to corruption and scandals that were obvious to his readers) convince the boy that “religion” must be one of a succession of material, financial, or sexual advantages that he and others have missed out on. Raft in these cases cannot always reasonably connote “died” or “left (of its own volition),” and the mysterious “religion” cannot be glossed by the familiar term “God.” In this dilemma, a quasi-literal rather than an idiomatic rendition of the lament seems the only workable one. This miniature first-person *bildungsroman* is perhaps Dehkhodā’s most daring departure from verisimilitude among the many elastic near-fantasies in the *Charand-o Parand* narratives; at least so it might appear in translation. The polysemy of the verb raft, “has gone; disappeared; deserted (us); is dead,” in the author’s cannily manipulated scenarios, which is the primary reason for this.<sup>5</sup> Suffice it here to note that the naïve young Kerendi, or Candide, makes his mystified way after a perfunctory religious “education” through a selfish and corrupt society where “religion” (*din*, an unidentifiable object which he has been told is essential for his salvation) eludes him, as it seems to elude so many others. At least he is a sufficiently modern creation to send his *cri de coeur* to a newspaper, where his correspondent—perhaps feeling obliged to heed the censor—is sympathetic but enigmatic. Below we provide excerpts from this column:

People, for God’s sake help me! Newspaperman, for fear of the dawn of doomsday write to me, a Kurdish country boy, a response to my question!

My name is Āzād Khan Kerendi. My father fled with me from the oppression of Hosayn Khan Qal’eh-zanjiri in Kerend (a district in Kermanshah province, in the west of Iran) to Tehran, and he died there. I was a child; I went to stay as a houseboy with an ākhund who taught elementary school, and whenever I was free I sat in with his students. The ākhund saw that I was eager to learn and taught me to read. I became a mulla.

It was written in the book that you had to have religion; anyone who didn’t would go to hell. I asked the ākhund what religion was. He told me it was Islam. I asked him what “Islam” meant. He said a few words, which I memorized; he said that this was the religion of Islam.

<sup>5</sup>See also Christophe Balaý and Michel Cuypers, *Nouvelle persane*, 74.

Then I grew up. The ākhund told me, You're no use to me anymore. I need a houseboy at home that my wife needn't veil herself in front of. You're a grown man; go away! So I left the ākhund's home and went begging. Another ākhund told me to go the house of the emām-jom'eh, the leader of the Friday prayer: he would feed me and give me some money.

It seems that the [Mojtahed] Mirza Hasan Āshtiyāni had taken the endowment of the Marvi School from the emām-jom'eh and was now feeding those who came to his house and also paid them some cash.

When I got to the emām-jom'eh's house I saw a crowd of people in the courtyard. They were all lamenting, "Religion has deserted us!" I was at a loss to understand how religion could have left. I remembered the words that the teacher-ākhund had said to me and wondered if maybe he didn't know that religion is actually the endowment fund. . . .

Not long after, Mirza Hasan died. His son took over the Marvi School. One day about that time I was at the Shah Abd al-Azim shrine when a crowd of divinity students arrived, crying, "Religion is no more!" Later I found out that Sālār al-Dowleh had summoned the coffee shop lad Ahmad Qahvechi to Arabistan, and Mirza Hasan's son had sent the students to Shah Abd al-Azim to turn him back. So now I thought that Ahmad Qahvechi was religion. As it happened, when I saw Ahmad I fell for him. I told myself the students must be right, but I could never have him. This [handsome] boy would have cost me a fortune. I was a beggar. On top of that, how could a boy who was the object of a feud between Sālār al-Dowleh and Mirza Hasan's son ever be mine? I saw that I was bound to go hell, since I had no way of getting religion.

After that I became an errand boy for a dealer in secondhand goods. He had a very pretty daughter and had made a temporary marriage [sigheh] with a pretty girl. Khadijeh the singer charmed his temporary wife, who left the dealer for Ayn al-Dowleh. The dealer had also arranged the marriage of his daughter to a sayyid whose brother was a mojtahed[ranking cleric], but later the girl was abducted from her husband's house. The dealer lamented that religion had forsaken him, though I couldn't figure out which girl he meant. Whichever one it was, I reckoned religion was a good thing! Since I despaired of ever getting it for myself, I resigned myself to hell and gave up hankering after religion. . . .



Anyway, I'm at a complete loss to fathom which of all these is meant by "religion." Is it what the teacher-ākhund told me? Or the funds of pious endowments? Or the beautiful Ahmad Qahvechi, the coffee shop lad? Or the broker's sigheh and his daughter? . . . Or something else? For God's sake, and for fear of the dawn of doomsday, tell me, because I'm terrified of going to hell!

The Beggar Gholām Āzād Khan Ali-Allāhi

As seen from the excerpt above, by far the paper's harshest criticisms were reserved for the clerical establishment, those from the lowest ranking members of the caste of mullā, who were blamed for propagating ignorance and superstition, and those belonging to the highest echelons such as mojtaheds and emām-jom'ehs.

Here is another excerpt from a column titled *Qandarun*.<sup>6</sup> This column—continued in the next issue of *SE* but lacking the promised third episode in subsequent issues—differs substantially from all other *Charand-o Parand* items in being less diffuse and more focused and having in every way the makings of a serialized short story or novella.<sup>7</sup> Social criticism—of the ulama and the situation of women—is still firmly lodged in the subtext, and the authorial voice-over begins and punctuates the tale at intervals. The life of Hajji Abbās to date is seen in flashback, a retrospective reverie triggered at the end of the first episode by the sight of the hajji's attractive neighbor Roqiye.

Everybody knows that among us, calling a woman by her own name is wrong. Not just a little wrong, but egregiously wrong. Actually, what's the point of a man calling his wife by her name? Until she has children, he says, Hey! And when she has children, he uses the child's name to call her, as for example: Abul! Fāti! Abu! Roqi! and so on. The wife answers, Uh-huh! Then the man says his piece, and that's it. Otherwise, to call a wife by name is plain wrong.

In the month of the sacrifice [Dhu'l-Hijja] last year, on a Thursday, Hajji Mulla Abbās came home around noon after several nights spent away. At the doorway he coughed twice, said once, Yā Allāh, and called, Sādeq!

His wife came bustling from the brazier, on which she was roasting indigo leaves for eyeliner, toward the hallway, and the neighbor women in the courtyard, two of whom were applying eyeliner in their indoor clothes [a

<sup>6</sup>Published in *SE* No. 27 (29 April 1908) and No. 28 (May 5, 1908). <sup>7</sup>cf. Balay and Cuypers, *Nouvelle persane*, 95–97.

pleated overskirt over pantaloons] while a third combed her hair in the sun, ran into their rooms. But one of them, at the moment when Hajji Mulla Abbās entered, tripped and fell flat on the ground, and her short jacket (as all Muslims have seen happen) was forced over the top of her skirt and rode up as far as her shoulder blades. She cried out, Woe! Shame on me! A strange man has seen me undressed! Woe! Oh God, I want to die! And as fast as she could she got up and, clutching a corner of her headscarf tightly over her face, rushed into her room. The hajji's wife meanwhile laughed out loud and said, It doesn't matter, Roqiyeh! Hajji is your brother, in this world and the next.

Hajji Mulla Abbās gave his wife the two loaves that he held in his right arm and the piece of sesame halva wrapped in blue paper clutched in his left hand. They both went into their room, though Hajji Mulla Abbās's eyes were still fixed on Roqiyeh's room.

Hajji Mulla Abbās was originally from Kand, a landless peasant. Up until the year of the last glanders outbreak he had eked out a living with his late father as a muleteer, hiring out the few donkeys they owned to the villagers. When his father caught glanders and died, that was the end of them as a family; he sold the donkeys and came to Tehran to work as a tradesman. For a few days in Tehran he sold sieves from Istanbul, fans for keeping braziers alight, and pajama drawstrings and at night went to the mosque of the Yunos Khan madrasa to sleep. His merchandizing did not prosper, what with the high cost of living in Tehran and his own profligate leanings. For instance, somehow or other he had to have a chelow kebab once a week, and on the other days two sangak loaves and a one-abbāsi pot of soup hardly sufficed him.

Finally, one Friday afternoon he went into the courtyard of the madrasa to take a nap and happened to see some unexpected things that set him thinking. So he went to see one of the ākhunds and got him to spill the beans by asking, That woman who was just here—was she your wife?

The ākhund said, Muslim, what would I want with a wife? With all these women hanging around Tehran, what would I need a wife for?

Abbās understood all that he needed to and without any shyness asked about the rates. The cleric told him, Five shāhis, ten shāhis, and if she's very young, one qerān tops.

Abbās heaved a sigh and said, You ākhunds have it made.

The cleric asked, What’s the matter, don’t you have a place to live?

No, Abbās told him.

Do you have any money? asked the cleric.

Yeah, said Abbās hesitantly.

OK, said the cleric. Since you’re a stranger here, my cell is your home. Friday and Saturday are my days off, when some postmenopausal women hoping for marriage, sometimes widows, and young virgins too, come around; you can come—I am at your disposal.

Abbās thanked the cleric and thereafter submitted more or less to his will, and bit by bit the money from the sale of his donkeys was running out.

One day he asked the ākhund, I wish I could become a theology student.

No problem, the latter replied. You can read, can’t you?

Of course, replied Abbās. I learned a little bit of reading in the village because my father forced me to. I can read Yā Sin and Al-Rahmān and Yusabbah very well.

Very good, that’s enough, said the cleric. Immediately he brought out an old outfit of his own and a tattered turban, saying, The cost of these is two tumans—I’ll give them to you on credit; pay me when you have the money.

And indeed, in a few minutes Abbās was a full-fledged ākhund, quite delighted at the way he looked. Starting the next day, he attended the course on exegesis taught by the madrasa’s mojtahed and was allocated a half cell and a one-tuman monthly stipend plus two qerāns and five shāhis for lamp oil. Six months later, Ākhund Mulla Abbās was participating everywhere in the commemorative prayer gatherings held at annual and forty-day intervals, banquets, and rowzeh-khwānis. He also read the prayers at funerals and performed, on commission, proxy fasts and prayers and the recitation of the whole Qur’an during special periods. From his contact with the other students he learned to thicken the Arabic consonants, overdoing it so as to pronounce even h like h and alef like ayn, s like s, and z like z; then he presided as Qur’an reader in the [major] mourning rituals.

But the real rise of Āqā Shaykh began when he heard that the mojtahed of the madrasa was appropriating half of the waqf revenues for himself, contrary to the will of the donor and indeed in contravention of the regulations governing pious endowments. So he gradually started to mutter insinuations and then openly to defy the teacher, and one by one the other students joined in. The mojtahed realized he would have to buy off the ringleader of the rebellion, who was Mr. Mulla Abbās. Accordingly he gave the ākhund a three-hundred-tuman stipend out of the tithe paid by one of the neighborhood magnates, in order to make the hajj; Mulla Abbās took the cash and set off for Mecca. He made sure, of course, to beg at least two-thirds of his expenses for the journey from his fellow-pilgrims.

When the ākhund returned from Mecca, with just those liras he had earned by conducting rowzeh-khwānis for Iranian merchants resident in Istanbul and Egypt, he had left, all expenses paid, 225 tumans. He went straight to his old madrasa, but the mojtahed—ostensibly to comply with the waqf regulations; in reality to get rid of that nuisance Hajji Mulla Abbās—had given his half cell to somebody else. He made a fuss and expostulated, and might have been able to get his room back somehow, but his heart wasn't in it. Because now Hajji Mulla Abbās was rich, a man of some consequence. It was time for Hajji Āqā to get married and settle down in a house of his own with a life of his own. How long was he supposed to squat in a corner of a madrasa waiting for Thursdays and Fridays? Hajji Āqā decided to get married and asked all his friends and acquaintances, if they came upon an attractive and well-to-do virgin, to let him know.

One day a local grocer informed Hajji Āqā that there was an orphan girl on his street whose father had been a merchant, and though young, she was of a noble family and, so far as he had heard, pretty; it seemed to be not a bad match. Hajji Āqā followed up on this, and he brought home a girl of eleven, with a dowry of five hundred tumans. This was that same Sādeq whose maiden name was Fātemeh and who was now known by the name of the son she had borne to Hajji Āqā. . . .

Dehkhodā was arguably the founder of modern Persian prose fiction and satire. Not only in language, where his fluid semi-colloquial style and transcribed reproduction of everyday speech, and apt use of proverbs, catchphrases, and folklore anticipated better-known writers (Mohammad-Ali Jamāl-zādeh by more than ten years, Sādeq

Hedāyat by twenty); but also in satirical technique and subject matter. His unfinished story “Gum” (*Qandarun*) is a tantalizing glimpse of the full-length fiction he might have produced. (Indeed, it may have been intended as a bid to break free of the stigma of journalism for the more prestigious category of a writer of serious literature.)

The opening episode begins, and ends, with a pointed jab at the etiquette of a man’s not addressing even his own wife by name—not even by her title of “wife,” but one step removed, by the name of her (or rather, his) son. This indirection is not limited to Iran, or even other Muslim countries, but occurs also in some English-speaking societies (“Muvver!” in the stereotyped Cockney’s summons to his wife). Generally seen as a euphemism in the cause of public modesty, it is in effect an overt denial of a woman’s identity and autonomy.

Interestingly, inappropriate use of a wife’s name springs the plot in Hedāyat’s short story “Hajji Morād” (1930). The protagonist, a bazaar shopkeeper who had inherited his title from his father without having made the pilgrimage to Mecca, is nevertheless respected in his milieu and proud of himself. On his way home one evening he muses over the good and bad points of his wife, settling on the bad ones (her acid tongue—for which he beats her—and her scorn for his fake title), working himself up into a quiet rage and resolving to beat her when he gets home. Suddenly he sees what he takes to be his wife (recognizable by the white trim of her *chādor*), evidently outdoors without his permission and now passing him without an acknowledgment. Seeing red, he calls her by name: “Shahrbānu!” The woman rounds on him for his impertinence and threatens to call the police. Convincing himself that she has disguised her voice (a trick of hers, as he claims to himself, and to the onlookers), he slaps her. Of course she turns out not to be his wife, and the police—oh so politely, but to his mortification and humiliation—fine and publicly flog him.

Hajji Mulla Abbās, the semi-literate ex-seminarian in “Gum,” is a genuine *hājji* (having blackmailed his teacher into giving him a stipend to make the pilgrimage), and has climbed the pecuniary and social ladder by small-time religious transactions rather than commercial steps. He tolerates his wife with a contempt similar to that of Hajji Morād, but we are not privileged to witness the results of this (if any). Hedāyat’s other fictional *hājji*, the anti-hero of his later and well-known novella, “Hajji Āqā” (1945), is another fake—a devious bazaar-raised businessman whose wealth and connections make him a sought-after player in political circles of World War II Iran. Here the overriding vice on display is hypocrisy, which *Charand-o Parand* columns also pillory constantly in the actions of real persons.

But religion, and in particular Imami Shi'ism, in the form of ignorant and hypocritical mullas, and patriarchal prejudice and primitive superstitions promoted to the status of divine laws, provides a frequent target for both these satirists. Hedāyat's "Alaviyeh Khanom," "Talab-e Āmorzesh," and "Mohallel" echo many of the abuses highlighted by Dehkhodā in his short, fictional "letters to the editor" and domestic dramas that populate the *Charand-o Parand* columns. In both, women are the most frequent victims of lower-rank clerics, their own superstitions, or respected members of society with pious labels. The hajji in particular seems to have become a stock character in early modern fiction, portrayed as "fanatical, conservative, and stingy" and representing "a social force inhibiting progress" by Jamālzādeh, Sādeq Chubak, Iraj Pezeshkzād, and Ja'far Shahribāf, as well as Hedāyat and Dehkhodā.<sup>8</sup>

### Dehkhodā as Religious Reformer

The columns cited above might give the impression that Dehkhodā was not just anti-clerical but anti-religious. In fact, Dehkhodā was equally committed to reforming Islam. He wrote a series of editorials (*SE*, Nos. 12 through 16) that called for the establishment of a rationalist Islam based primarily on the Qur'an and the legacies of early Islam. These editorials wove a new narrative about the history of humanity, where Dehkhodā referenced the Qur'an and prophetic hadiths, ignoring most other Shi'i sources.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, except for the figure of Ali, other Imams or Shi'i hadiths were rarely referred to.

*SE*'s criticism of the religious establishment centered on the argument that popular and ritualistic Shi'ism, which focused on veneration of the Imams, was anathema to both early Islamic principles and the requirements of a modern rational religion. In their rituals, Shi'i believers prayed to the Imams and offered them sacrifices so that the Imams might intercede on their behalf, grant their wishes in this world, and secure them salvation in the next. In a new interpretation of Qur'anic verses on *tawhid* and *shirk*, Dehkhodā criticized the notion of intercession and the rituals that facilitated them as a form of *shirk*.

He also offered a dramatic reinterpretation of the concept of khatamiyat<sup>10</sup> the notion that the Prophet Mohammad was the Seal of the Prophets. The ulama had

<sup>8</sup>Kamran Talattof, *The Politics of Writing in Iran: A History of Modern Persian Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 23-24 and note 24.

<sup>9</sup>Authorship of these *SE* editorials, which are often not signed (by Dehkhodā or Mirza Jahāngir Khan), has long puzzled scholars. But the

*Loghatnāme* states that Dehkhodā wrote all the editorials and all the *Charand-o Parand* columns, except for the editorial in No. 20, which was written by Mirza Jahāngir Khan Shirāzi. See *Dehkhodā's Loghatnāme*, s.v. "Šur-e Esrāfil."

<sup>10</sup>See the editorial in *SE*, No. 13, 3.

maintained that humanity had reached its highest degree of perfection with Islam and the task of the *mojtaheds* was simply to safeguard this knowledge. Dehkhodā challenged this interpretation. With Islam, he said, human beings had achieved the stage of *ensāniyat* and gained the potential to decide important matters of life on their own. There was no limit to human progress. No one could predict when human beings might reach a state of perfection. No “mojtahed,” “governor,” or “doctor” could predict such a time. This statement was not “injurious to our Muslim religion.” It only harmed “those who had convinced others that *they* had reached the state of perfection—that no one else was worthy of such a high rank and dignity” in the universe.<sup>11</sup>

He proceeded to argue that early Islam had a constitutional form of government and that after the Rāshidun Caliphate (the first four caliphs of Islam) the practice was lost to Muslims. By invoking the legacies of all four early Muslim caliphs and not just Ali, whom Shi‘ites revere as the sole legitimate heir to the Prophet, Dehkhodā attempted to bridge the divide between the Shi‘i and Sunni worlds.

He also established continuity between early Islam and modern (Christian) constitutional forms of government, suggesting that Christianity had only perfected early Islamic principles. Today “we need to borrow terms from Western languages,” where much effort has been exerted to “further” the notion of constitutionalism, and new terms had been coined such as “politics,” “reactionary” or “conservative,” terms which still had no Persian equivalents. “Politics,” for example, referred to issues pertaining to one’s livelihood and not matters of “Judgment Day or somebody’s religion.” In its efforts to castigate superstitious beliefs, *SE* was simply following the examples of the Qur’an, while discussing contemporary political issues in Western terms.

In *SE* No. 16, in an editorial titled “Muslims and Shirk,” Dehkhodā criticized another central tenet of Shi‘ism, the concept of the religious intercession (*shafā‘at*) of holy figures (such as Shi‘i Imams) or of ritual practices. He linked the very notion of intercession, a central tenant of Shi‘ism, to shirk. He claimed that according to the Qur’an one could appeal to God or Mohammad, but not to anyone else for intercession. To prove his point, he quoted a number of suras from the Qur’an, as he generally did with other arguments. These included *Yūnus* (Jonah) 10: 3: “Surely, your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens and the earth in six days, then was

<sup>11</sup>See the editorial in *SE*, No. 14 (19 September 1907), 3.

established on the throne, regulating all things. No intercessor (can plead with him) except by His leave. That is Allah, your Lord; so worship Him.” In addition, Islam approved of only one manner of intercession, i.e., repentance (*tawba*), by which the believer promised not to engage in the same act again and to observe other requirements. Furthermore, the possibility of repentance was open only to the living and not the dead. The sura *Ghāfir* (“Forgiver [of sins]”; also called *al-Mu’min* “The believer”) had warned about Judgment Day, “when the hearts will be choking the throats. The wrong-doers (*zālimīn*) will have no friend nor intercessor who might be heeded” (40: 19). From these and many other verses where the term *shafā’at* appears, Dehkhodā concluded, “appeals to those other than God, in any name or any manner, suggested belief in the power of intercession.” And according to the Qur’an, belief in intercession is tantamount to *shirk* (polytheism).<sup>12</sup> In other columns and essays he directed a veiled attack on a third central tenet of Shi‘ism, the belief in the reemergence of the Twelfth Imam as Mahdi on Judgment Day. Thus Dehkhodā was undermining three central pillars of Shi‘ism—the notions of *khātamiyat*, *shafā’at*, and *mahdaviyat*.<sup>13</sup>

These essays ended after several public attacks on the offices of the newspaper and the temporary closing of the journal. Dehkhodā lamented that he and his colleagues were too frightened to open up this discussion as they had planned and “compare the beliefs of contemporary Muslims with the teachings of early Islam. Since neither was the public ready to hear such things nor had we remained courageous and brave.”<sup>14</sup> Instead he turned to a social democratic discussion of the economy and the nature of work and capitalism in Iran, an apparently a safer topic than religious reform.

### Dehkhodā and Other Muslim Reformers

How groundbreaking were Dehkhodā’s ideas on religious reform? If we compare Dehkhodā to the Egyptian Muslim reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), who was roughly his contemporary, we do see some possible overlap. Dehkhodā might have been influenced by ‘Abduh, but again the writings of Dehkhodā are unique in terms of content, style, and the intended audience. In his *Risālat al-Tawhid*, published in 1897, ‘Abduh wrote about the Qur’an as a logical text, “which spoke to the rational mind and alerted the intelligence” (p. 32).<sup>15</sup> He condemned the rote memorization of religious texts and blind adherence to religious leaders (*taqlid*), insisting that “Man

<sup>12</sup>See the editorial in *SE*, No. 16, 3.

<sup>13</sup>Soroudi makes a similar argument. See her “*Sur-e Esrafil*, 1907-08,” 236.

<sup>14</sup>See *SE* No. 16, 3.

<sup>15</sup>Page references are to Muhammad ‘Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, a translation of *Risālat al-Tawhid* by Ishaq Musa’ad and Kenneth Cragg (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1966).



was not created to be led by a bridle” (p. 127). He also argued that the Qur’an had anticipated the Christian Reformation in ensuring that divine scripture was available for all to read, and even quoted a “western philosopher” to the effect that intellectual awakening came to Europe as a result of increased contact with Islamic culture and scholarship in the sixteenth century (p. 128). ‘Abduh similarly devoted much space to the doctrine of free will and its discussion and limits in the Qur’an (p. 32). Finally, he emphatically denounced the practice of intercession (*shafā‘at*):

[Through Islam] man’s initiative was released from its captivity to mediators, intercessors, divines, initiates, and all who claimed to be masters of ‘hidden’ cults and pretended to authority over the relations men have with God through their works. These ‘mediators’ set themselves up as disposers of salvation with the power of damnation and bliss. In sum, man’s spirit found freedom from the slavery of deceivers and charlatans (p. 125).

However, we should remember that ‘Abduh was a Sunni Muslim who found an easy scapegoat in non-Muslims and Shi‘i Muslims for the downfall of the Muslim Empire. He maintained that Shi‘ites had caused the first civil war (*fitna*) in the Muslim community after the death of the third caliph, Uthman, and “exalted Ali and some of his descendants to divine or near-divine status.” (p. 33). ‘Abduh also managed to find a Jewish culprit for this religious transgression, so that he could spare Ali. He pointed to a certain Abdallāh ibn Sabā, who had embraced Islam, and was “an excessive admirer of Ali (whose face God honors)” as the true cause of the *fitna*. (p. 32).

In contrast, Dehkhodā called for a vision of reform that was non-sectarian vis-à-vis Sunnis and respectful toward non-Muslims. He was far too sophisticated to blame the derailment of early Islam, or the fall of the Muslim Empires, on Sunnis, non-Muslims, or foreigners. His praise of early Islam included the first three Caliphs, also claimed by the Sunnis. Nor did he blame only non-Muslims for Iran’s past or present problems. In revealing the machinations of the Great Powers, he never reduced Western politics to Christianity’s hostility toward Islam, though he was fully cognizant of anti-Muslim prejudices from having lived in the West. Instead, he always looked for native shortcomings when responding to Western adversaries. His various references to recognized minorities of Iran—Armenians, Zoroastrians, and Jews—was also always full of compassion, as he insisted on legal equality (*mosāwāt*) for non-Muslims. The one exception lay in his characterization of the Azali Bābi and Bahā’i communities of Iran. Because conservative clerics routinely accused *SE*

writers of harboring Bābi religious tendencies, and because the paper's manager Mirza Jahāngir Khan Shirāzi had espoused Bābi sympathies before establishing the paper, *SE*'s writers found no option but to be prudent in this one arena and simply denied the accusation that they were Bābis.<sup>16</sup>

It seems a pity that these remarkable contributions of Dehkhodā were lost to subsequent generations and not built upon both his enormous literary breakthrough which preceded the work of Muhammad Ali Jamalzadeh's *Yeki Bud Yeki Nabud* (1921) by more than a decade, and that of Sadeq Hedayat (Hajji Morad, by nearly three decades, as well as his pioneering discourse on the need for a Rationalist Islam in the Shi'i world. Was it because these essays were deemed journalistic pieces since they were not published in book form? Did Dehkhodā's anti-intercessionist stance imply an attack on visits to shrines, a major element of popular Shi'ism? Or were Dehkhodā's attempts to bridge the gulf between Enlightenment thought and Islam equated with the Pahlavi era ban on mourning rituals of Muharram and other forms of popular Shi'ism? What can be stated unequivocally is that Dehkhodā was the founder of a new Rationalist Discourse on Shi'ism in Iran and his pioneering contribution needs to be recognized.

Times have changed since the twilight of the Qajar dynasty. Seventy years after the Constitutional Revolution, the political upheaval later to be known as the Islamic Revolution inspired a new crop of critical and humorously satirical journals in exile, aimed not at the defeated regime but at its successors; notable was *Asghar Āghā* in London, edited by Hādi Khorsandī, which (with an online edition) is published still. Today, in Iran as elsewhere, print journalism as a medium for satire has largely given way to the Internet. In addition to blogs, choice television skits and homemade videos (and, of course, poetry), with a critical and mocking message find a discerning audience there. The Islamic government remains just as concerned with this new generation of poets as Mohammad-Ali Shah was with Dehkhodā. The state continues to arrest poets such as Hila Sedighi<sup>17</sup> and Haloo (Mohammad Rezā Ali Payām), an act that only boosts the status of these brave women and men in the public's eyes.

<sup>16</sup>For a discussion of *SE*'s treatment of non-Muslims and other minorities see Nahid Mozaffari, "Crafting Constitutionalism: Ali Abkar Dehkhoda and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2001), 187-193.

<sup>17</sup>See for example her poem "Iranian Woman," on Youtube or Haloo's "Aqā Joon," which can be viewed on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pK6sq6PXSHc>. Retrieved on February 6, 2016.