

Farzaneh Milani

Guest Editor's Note

Simin Behbahani is one of the most iconic figures in Iran today. For well over six decades, she has triumphed over silence and censorship by weaving death-defying poems of wonder and mystery. As a firm believer in the futility of fighting violence with violence, and as an advocate for an Iran in which dissent is neither eliminated nor punished, she has relied on words to fight for justice and human dignity. It is only fitting then that *Iranian Studies* should devote a single-author special issue to Behbahani.

This issue is the proceedings of the Simin Behbahani conference convened by Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi at the University of Toronto in June 2006, funded by the Persian Cultural Foundation. The six essays gathered here engage various perspectives on a revelatory and revolutionary body of work. Our collection of essays begins with “Simin Behbahani: Iran’s National Poet.” In celebration that after more than a thousand years a woman has achieved unprecedented popularity during her lifetime, this piece studies the evolution of Behbahani’s poetic career and places her work in a literary and historic context by highlighting her formal, thematic, and gendered contributions to contemporary Persian literature.

Next, Kamran Talattof analyzes one of Behbahani’s most popular and best-loved poems, “I Will Rebuild You, Oh My Homeland” (1981), by combining formal and textual analysis with discourse analysis. He historicizes the poem not only as a war poem, being very much a product of its moment of composition at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War, but also for the new socio-political meanings it gained nearly two decades later. Such analysis also allows Talattof to argue for Behbahani as a transitional figure between two important Iranian literary periods: a pre-1979 literary culture and a post-Revolutionary period that he describes as new modernist, particularly in its development of an Iranian narrative of the self. Talattof sees Behbahani as being at the forefront of this literary trend, and his reading of her poem, attentive as it is to both classical Persian poetics and contemporary narrative theory, bears out his insights into Behbahani’s narrative and poetic skills.

Behbahani is also a translator, an essayist, a short-story writer and a storyteller, but the growing body of critical literature on her has largely neglected her prose. M.R. Ghanoonparvar takes a broad view of Behbahani’s corpus as he addresses prose that has rarely been analyzed. Ghanoonparvar discusses Behbahani’s contribution to Iranian prose and places this writing within the tradition of the *naqqal*. Like ancient storytellers, Behbahani flavors her prose with poetry—her own and that of others—and paints a broader canvas than she does in her more popular

poetic writings. In spite of its limitations and the absence of the structural elements that readers expect from rich prose writing, Ghanoonparvar stresses the importance of this writing as a sort of sketchbook of contemporary Iranian life and argues that scholars should pay more attention to it.

Rivanne Sandler's essay on Behbahani's "Poetic Conversations" combines formal analysis with an astute sense of history. She identifies Behbahani's place within Iranian literary history in general, and within the history of Iranian women's writing in particular. By describing the genesis of women's poetry in Iran before Behbahani, Sandler appropriately recognizes Behbahani's unique poetic gifts as the concretization of a familiar feature of women's poetry. She focuses specifically on the role of conversation and dialogue in Behbahani's poetry, a frequent and variegated trope. Sandler links Behbahani's conversations back to conversations in earlier women's poetry. She stresses the trope's status not only as a feminine and complex poetic technique, but also as a politicized one that Behbahani has used to bridge the gap between her private poetry and her public concerns.

In "Text and the Body in a Poem by Simin Behbahani," Mahdi Tourage reads one of Behbahani's better-known and earlier poems, "*Raqqaseh*," in concert with some post-structuralist philosophers and literary critics, Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Spivak, in particular. Tourage's theoretical insights do not overshadow Behbahani's text. In fact, he allows the voice of Behbahani's poem and the voices of these critics to speak back and forth to each other over time and space. He studies the inner workings of Behbahani's poem from a phenomenological perspective, and prompts the reader "to (con)textualize his/her assigned cultural location." Focusing on purely the textual operations and performative functions of "*Raqqaseh*," Tourage revels in the poem's uniqueness as it simultaneously stands outside of and participates in Iranian literary traditions.

There is no question that Behbahani is a master craftswoman, welding innovation to tradition as she expands the formal and thematic boundaries of one of the most established poetic genres in Iran—the *ghazal*. In the final essay, Dominic Parviz Brookshaw provides a carefully nuanced understanding of Behbahani's main vehicle for poetic expression. He studies features other than meter—mainly imagery, language, and structure—in Behbahani's poetry and skillfully demonstrates her defamiliarization and remolding of the *ghazal*. By analyzing two poems from the 1973 *Resurrection* collection, "My Small World" and "Conversation," Brookshaw illustrates how Behbahani simultaneously brings to her readers the comfort of the familiar and the shock of the new, how she surprises with innovations in an old, but not obsolete poetic form.

Eight of Behbahani's poems in translation, selected from *A Cup of Sin*, adorn and conclude this special issue. We hope the rich, diverse essays gathered here will serve to broaden and invigorate ongoing conversations about Simin Behbahani and increase appreciation for her work. May her message of beauty and peace, of tolerance and social justice be carried across many languages, cultures, and continents.