

Manuchehr Jamali, The Obstinate Iranian Thinker

Manuchehr Jamali's writings cover a wide spectrum of subjects and ideas which are unfolding their outlines vis-à-vis a background of five thousand years or more of Iranian culture summed up by the author as "Farhang-e Simorgh" (Simorgh culture). With diligence and patience he spent the last years consulting dictionaries, encyclopaedias and further philological material together with classical Iranian literature (10th to 15th century A.D.), Zoroastrian texts and other early writings from the pre-Islamic period to re-construct the Simorgh myth, a way of thinking which has given to the people of Iran their unique culture. But there it does not stop. Instead of staying dead historic artefacts his findings provide him with an instrument to approach the problems of present day Iran. With an easy hand he tackles the task of connecting modern thinking with the most ancient Iranian ideas and offers solutions to philosophical, political, social etc. problems which enchant the Iranian readers because here they can observe the process of creative reflection in their own Persian terms and language.

M. Jamali is an advocate of self-thinking and opposed to translations. Translations from foreign languages are a necessity for any modern society, but as long as the new ideas do not become rooted in already existing concepts of the respective people they are lost on them. As an example he cites communism. In Farsi there exist ample translations of all kinds of Marxist literature up to the Frankfurter Schule etc. and even Habermas, one of its last exponents, visited Iran lately causing a lot of public attention. But a discussion about Marxism with an Iranian communist very quickly ends in a cul-de-sac because his believes as a Muslim preceding his Marxist thinking have never been questioned by him. Marxism was simply put on top of everything. M. Jamali argues that a modern liberal democratic Iranian state needs to base itself on Iranian ideas to give the Iranian people an opportunity to really identify themselves with it. The "Farhang-e Simorgh" is for him the ideal solution.

M. Jamali's first attempts as an independent thinker go back to his early youth when still at school he became interested in Zoroastrianism and wrote a little book about the subject which was even printed. Over the following years further short writings were added although he had to study physics at Teheran University where he finished with success. By the end of the 1950s he was already in Germany but his now philosophical studies at the universities of Tübingen, Frankfurt, München and Berlin were marred by financial problems. The next fifteen years seem to have been a time of incubation. When in the second half of the 1970s he spent more time in London he suddenly came into his own and over the years he has published an oeuvre of more than eighty titles, mostly in small or even tiny editions which he financed nearly completely himself. There was only from time to time the odd "murid" (disciple) who sent him some money.

Up to now his intellectual development can be divided vaguely into four to five phases. The first phase shows him still deeply steeped in religio- philosophical subjects. The main influence on his writings during this period are Attar and Maulawi, and from among European writers the modern German philosophers Karl Jaspers and Max Scheler, but also Hegel, Nietzsche and the Danish Christian thinker Soeren Kierkegaard. Nietzsche stayed with him as a favourite. His next phase begins with the arrival of Khomeini on the political stage. M. Jamali discovers a "Feindbild". He writes political articles related to the on-going discussions about the situation in Iran. He even publishes together with a friend his own weekly newspaper although just for a few month. Koran, Bible, Karl Popper, Friedrich A. Hayek, books about constitutional law – this is his most important reading material during that period. With the war going on between Iran and Iraq M. Jamali enters his third phase. He begins a closer study of Firdausi's

Shahnameh, and also of Hafez. Plato and the modern German philosopher Ernst Bloch accompany his writing into the fourth phase where he becomes interested in theories of myth and mythology and discovers the female Iranian goddesses as transmitters of ancient Iranian ideas and values. In his momentary phase he is busy defining “Farhang-e Simorgh”, the phenomenon of an ancient Iranian culture the values of which never ceased to exist among the Iranian people.

Highlights of M. Jamali’s publications are “*Azadi haqq-e intiqad az islam ast*” (“Freedom Is The Right To Criticize Islam”), London 1983; “*Ateshi keh sho’oleh khwahad keshid*” (“A Fire Which Will Blaze Away”), London 1987; “*Posht beh su’alat-e mohal*” (“Turning The Back On Absurd Questions”), London 1991; “*Mafhum-e “wara`-e kofr wa din” dar ghazaliyat-e Sheikh ‘Attar*” (“The Meaning of “Beyond Belief and Disbelief” in Sheikh Attar’s Ghazaliyat”), London 1993; “*Kariz*”, (“Subterranean Water Channel”), London 1994; “*Rendi – howiyat-e mo’ama’i-ye irani*” (“Rendi – The Enigmatic Iranian Identity”), London 1996; “*Maulawi-ye sanamparast*” (“Maulawi, The Idolator”), London 2005; “*Sekulariteh dar iran ya ‘arusi-ye insan ba jehan*” (“Secularism In Iran Or Man’s Marriage With The World”), London 2006.

“Kariz” is a collection of poems on philosophical themes. M. Jamali is composing poetry perhaps even longer than prose. All kinds of abstract thoughts are transformed by his poetic creativeness into attractively bright and lively images and eventually put down in free verse elucidating his prose by widening the out-look as well as adding a further aesthetic dimension to his work.

M. Jamali’s library is extensive. Persian literature, books on Islamic themes and religion in general, works on philosophy covering the development of philosophical thought in the western world and outside from the beginnings up to today, writings on political sciences, sociology, jurisprudence, art and archaeology, etc.. During his extensive travels in Europe and USA M. Jamali collected numerous books on these different fields of study. Apart from Farsi he reads German, English, French and Arabic and he has acquired the necessary knowledge of those languages which are assisting his philological research. Various dictionaries and encyclopaedias supplement and complete the tools for his investigations.

As already mentioned, the Simorgh culture, the “Farhang-e Simorgh” has caught M. Jamali’s imagination for the moment. It is becoming such a substantial part of his work as a writer and philosopher that a closer look at some of the basic ideas will also serve as a brief introduction to M. Jamali’s own world of thought.

In Iranian culture the concept of “**mehr**” (love, care) combined with the term “**kherad**” (creative reason) means a form of social cohesion dominated by the idea of care: care for one another and the community, care for nature, care for life. The basic ideas and imagery of the key terms related to “**mehr**” and “**kherad**” are taken from the world of plants and cultivation which might indicate that they were originally conceived by a civilization in harmony and co-operation with nature. Man is thought of as “**nay**” (cane; flute) or as a “seed” (“**tokhm**”) from the “tree of life”. A seed naturally implies “growth”: Iranian man is not created by a god but he grows by himself as any other seed. Equally, a seed is surrounded by the “darkness” of the earth and contains in itself a “darkness” (“**tokhm dar tokhm**”, seed within a seed). “Darkness” and related terms as “**ghar**” (cave), “**cah**” (well) or “**zehdan**” (uterus) are positive terms. The dark enclosed space is thought of as the origin of new fertility. It means renewal, becoming fresh and new (“**fereshgard**”).

“Fertility” and likewise “creativity” are conceived as the result of the unification of a pair (“**djoff**”) including a third party, the “**miyan**” i.e. Bahman. “**Miyan**” is a term and

concept difficult to define. In Iranian cosmology it is “water or clouds” and “air or wind”, and its image is the wave. Since there is no division between heaven and earth, but everything is only earth or all-life (“**janan**”) in perpetual process of creation – a thought of far reaching ethical consequences– the “**miyan**” personified as the divinity Bahman is the invisible “in-between” who not only fills the gap but is the stimulator of new creation in conjunction with “**mehr**”. In abstract terms he is best defined as the principle of synthesis and intermingling. The yoke (“**yugh**”) is one of the images of the unified pair, but the general symbol for the idea of “**yeki seh tai**” (“trinity”) is the “disque (i.e. “**tokhm**”) with the two wings” which over the centuries changed into the magnificent figure of the bird Simorgh.

Man - male and female are of equal value -, nature and everything existing are part of the holy divine all-life (“**janan**”) in which “**mehr**” is omnipresent. For the Iranian life (“**jan**”) is holy and inviolable because of the immanence of the divine. To this way of thinking the term “transcendence” is foreign and simply not applicable - neither as philosophical nor as theological category. Inherent in the concept of “**miyan**” is the principle of interrelatedness or interconnection (“**peywastegi**”) but not in the sense of pantheism or monism. For the Iranian the whole of existence is in motion and in permanent change and he himself is not given to passivity and meditation but is part of the whole and actively participates in it with his reason and imagination.

Iranian man seen as individual is the owner of “**kherad**” (creative reason). He creates himself as a person (“**khod**”) and forms his environment guided by the concept of “**mehr**”. In the “**bon**”(essence) of his existence lies the hidden treasure (“**kanj**”) which relates him to all other men and gives him the potential to become part of “**jan**” in his role as human being. He is invested with the faculty of co-ordination of his senses and sensations which makes him active and dynamic. Here the notion of “**arkeh**” (lit.: nave of a wheel) is particularly relevant. The abundance of his creative energy is kept in check through “trial and error”. He has to try himself to find out who he is and where his individual limits are.

As social being Iranian man realizes the values of “**mehr**” with the help of his “**kherad-e samandeh**” (co-ordinating reason). For him creativity, love and care are at the root of any social order and not primarily the law. The ancient Greek idea of “**nomos**” i.e. the unrelenting divine or human law or the Islamic shari’a (Islamic law) is not Iranian thinking. Iranian man is anarchic by nature but in the most positive philosophical sense. He celebrates life in so many feasts (“**jashn**”) related to the seasons of the year i.e. he follows the natural rules around him, and then he adds his own, man made ones by a method of “**hamporsi**” (dialog) in which all members of society participate. When Iranian man uses his “**kherad-e samandeh**” to establish law and order he actually only provides a framework for creative activity.

In Iranian culture the “bunch of grapes” is an image which stands for mankind. Iranian people see themselves as part of the whole world. All individuals are related to one another just as the vine-berries carrying the “seeds” are attached to one another by the little wooden parts of the bunch. When seen as unity of all potential seeds the bunch of grapes (“**khusheh**”) symbolizes the divine.

Still today any Iranian child makes his first unconscious acquaintance with “**mehr**” and related concepts through the Simorgh from the stories of Firdausi’s “Shahnameh”. The huge beautiful bird saves Zal’s life, the royal child deserted by its parents, by acting as his wet nurse and later protects the hero Rostam, Zal’s son, during his adventures. The name Rostam goes back to the old Iranian linguistic root “**rao-takhma**” which means “...a “seed” which grows and becomes visible and green by its own force...”.

M. Jamali's research into the Iranian way of thinking began with Firdausi's *Shahnameh*. He has defined and analysed the abstract concepts behind the colourful figures and stories of this epic work and gradually re-discovered the "Farhang-e Simorgh". He followed up these ideas going back in time as far as literature and archaeological finds permit. He demonstrated that Zoroastrianism and dualistic thinking are only a by-product of Iranian culture and perhaps not even a felicitous one. The mainstream of Iranian culture was "Farhang-e Simorgh", a way of life so fit for survival that after the conquest of the Arabs in the seventh century A.D. a new full-fledged Iranian language emerges in the tenth century A.D. and becomes the carrier of the "Farhang-e Simorgh" in the guise of the Iranian epics, mathnawis and lyric poetry. In the same way as he went back in time M. Jamali now moves forward and Attar, Maulawi and Hafiz etc. have to yield their hidden knowledge about the "Farhang-e Simorgh". Bit by bit M. Jamali's understanding of the Simorgh culture is becoming more lucid and complete.

M. Jamali's writings are seductive, especially when in his line of argument he is quoting from classical Persian poetry and the magic beauty of these poems flows into the text. A certain unexpected directness with which the author states his opinion about a problem at the beginning of his expositions captivates immediately the reader's mind, and then the vividness and originality of the following ideas are so impressive that one surrenders oneself completely and without hesitation to this fascinating world of Iranian thought and culture. To set out his ideas M. Jamali has chosen a peculiar style of meandering from theme to theme and subject to subject and obviously it is a marvellous way to do justice to the complexity of his thinking. Foreign literature he uses for stimulation only and just to give an impetus to a certain idea so that it puts his own train of thought in motion. The ancient Iranian values adapt themselves with ease to his manifold concepts about a modern Iranian society and his readers are reacting with enthusiasm. They already called him the "Firdausi of today", the "Ghandi of Iran" and even the "Father of the new Iranian culture". Many years ago during an encounter between the two M. Jamalzadeh characterized him as: "...mardi ba neshat..." (a man of a happy disposition).

A secular state, human dignity, non-violence, freedom and creativity, plurality and equal rights for minorities, variety and diversity, integration instead of punishment, democratic, anti-authoritarian government, an open society which cares for its members and takes part in the international efforts to find answers to global challenges – ideas which the young Iranian intellectuals discover in M. Jamali's books as something which their Iranian culture always possessed but which lay dormant for centuries underneath a blanket of Islamic beliefs. M. Jamali inspires new hope within the young generation in Iran and with his "Farhang-e Simorgh" shows a peaceful way out of the disastrous situation which the atrocities of Khomeini's regime produced for their beloved country.

(Bea Burgwinkel, 2007)