



Women Poets Iranica
A Research Compendium

Shahnāz A‘lāmī

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Poet

September 24, 2025

<https://poets.iranicaonline.org/scholar/saeed-yousef/>

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Introduction

The question mark after A‘lāmī’s date of birth might seem strange given the fact she lived until as recently as 2003; but in an interview granted to and recorded by Hamīd Ahmadī as part of an oral history project, A‘lāmī, when asked about her date of birth, says, “If you want to know the truth, I don’t know exactly when, but I think in the Georgian calendar it should be 1921. I am going as far back as 1921 in order not to tell a [wrong] date which could make me younger ^۱.” *حالا من جلوتر می‌گیرم که کم نکرده باشم*.” The interviewer, Hamīd Ahmadī, however, mentions 1922 as the year of her birth on the website of the Research Association for Iranian Oral History.² On the other hand, when mentioning her as one of the past lecturers of Persian (from 1963 to 1980) at the Humboldt University in East Berlin, the late Professor Manfred Lorenz (1929-2017) gives the exact dates of birth and death as “18.11.1926-18.12.2003.”³ His article had appeared in *Spektrum Iran*, a journal published by the Cultural Counsellor of the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Germany; therefore, the dates given must reflect both the official data in the archives of the university, to which Professor Lorenz had had access, and the data available to the Iranian Embassy. And yet, this does not mean that we should not give more weight to A‘lāmī’s own words in the interview. Wrong dates of birth were quite common on Iranian identity documents (for a variety of reasons) and still are, especially on refugee passports.⁴ Still, Markaz-i Bar-rasī-yi

Asnād-i Tārīkhī (The Center of Historical Documents Survey) gives 1303 (1924/1925) as her date of birth.⁵



Figure 1: Portrate of Shahnaz A'lāmī

A'lāmī was born in the city of Na'in, roughly 150 kilometers east of Isfahan; her first name was Tubā but she used the name Shahnāz from an early age. Her parents were originally from the nearby village of Cham, where they possessed some land and used it as their resort. It was in Cham that A'lāmī learned first-hand about the poverty and misery of peasant families, in particular women, who were being exploited and mistreated. She made friends with their children as a child and felt closer to them than to her own family, as described in various anecdotes in her book عقده های زندگی ('Uqdah'hā-yi zindagī; The Complexes [or Enigmas] of Life), as here in the introductory note, titled "Kudakī" (Childhood):

If today, after the passage of several decades, I am writing about certain feelings and events from my youth, it is not with the purpose of making known to others my own life story but rather because these were the pulse-beats of my painful times, and they had drawn me and many others who passionately cared for the deprived people, onto political pathways.

¹See the Research Association for Iranian Oral History (www.iranianoralhistory.de/).

²www.iranianoralhistory.de/English/English-free/Video_Oral_History.html#alami (accessed 28 July 2022).

³Manfred Lorenz, „Zur Iranistik in Berlin,“ in *Spektrum Iran*, 26. JG. Nr. 1—2013, 56.

⁴A question mark might be needed for her first name too. In a footnote added by the editor Bahrām Chubīne in *Yād'hā va nāmah'hā (Reminiscences and Letters)*, Maryam Fīrūz is cited as having said that A'lāmī's first name was originally طوبی (Tübā) and that she changed it to Shahnāz later in Tehran. Shahnāz A'lāmī (with Bahrām Chubīne), *Yād'hā va nāmah'hā* (Köln: Mehr Verlag, 2004), 76. Using the Abbreviation ط.ا.ن.ا.ن.ی (T. A. Nā'inī) for the poet's name in her *Barguzīdah-yi Ash'ār* (Selected Poems), published in Tehran in 1381 (2002/2003), is also an indication.

⁵https://historydocuments.org/sanad/?page=show_document&id=qqql1wwmy68g

⁶Shahnāz A'lāmī, 'Uqdah'hā-yi zindagī (Bonn: Hafiz-Verlag, 1361 Š/1982; reprinted 1362 Š/1983), 3.

⁷Shahnāz A'lāmī, Oral History Interview, Part 1(1995).

⁸Shahnāz A'lāmī, Oral History Interview, Part 2 (1995).

None of the life accounts written here are pure phantasy or made-up stories: These people did exist and they have names, and many of them may still be alive ...

I was passionately attracted to them and was dissolved in them in the same way that a [rain]drop mingles with the sea.⁶

Her father, an active supporter of the constitutional movement, later became the head of the Office of Justice (Ra'īs-i 'Adlīyah) in Isfahan, and the stories he narrated to the family each day after work about the social injustices and corruption that he had to deal with in his job were another source of influence in forming the character of his young daughter.⁷ At a time when sending girls to school was not yet very common in Iran, Shahnāz was sent to school even before reaching the age of five. She had to finish the last year of high school in Tehran at Nāmūs high school. She recalls that the period of schooling was only for eleven years in those years, and that she had been able to finish even earlier, completing the tenth and eleventh grades in just one year.⁸

Upon returning to Isfahan, she was adamant to find a job and become financially independent despite all the threats and pressure from both the family (whom she had to keep in the dark for as long as she could) and society. She was finally one of the only three women in Isfahan employed as accountant at a bank; another of these three, very interestingly, was the poet Zhāleh Esfahānī (born Ethel Soltānī, 1921-2007). Both of them later joined the Tudeh Party and had to go into exile subsequently.

Unlike Zhāleh, however, Shahnāz did not succeed in becoming widely known as an established poet. When she died in Berlin in 2003, Iranians in the diaspora mainly mentioned her (if they did at all) as an instructor and founder of the Persian school "Parvin" in Berlin, or they focused on her role as an activist for women's rights. While these are all true, she herself, as she has said and written so often, would have loved to be mentioned first and foremost as a poet. (Ironically, it is her archenemy,



Noureddīn Kīanourī, who, in an attempt to belittle her role in the Tudeh Party, says, “She was a poet and merely wrote poems.”⁹) Kīanourī, the general secretary of the Tudeh Party from 1979 to 1984, had even accused her of having worked as a spy for SAVAK and persuaded the GDR—i.e., East Germany, where she resided—to expel her and send her to West Berlin. The present article does not intend to further discuss this accusation or take sides; we only know that A‘lāmī vehemently denied such accusations and many believed her.¹⁰

The book *Zanān-i Shā‘ir-i Iran* (Women Poets of Iran), which, it ought to be noted, is not a very serious anthology, was published in 1995 in Tehran and introduces 325 contemporary poetesses in over a thousand pages. One finds among them monarchists (like Shams-ul-Mulūk Mu sāhab, a senator under the Shah, hardly known as a poet), leftists (like Zhāleh Esfahānī or Mīnā Asadī), active members of the banned Iranian Writers’ Association [IWA] (like Batul Azīzpur and Sīmīn Behbahānī), but no mention of A‘lāmī. The reason for this omission cannot be owing to any political considerations. A‘lāmī was simply not known to the editor, and she was not on the whole, in spite of having published many poems in different journals since late 1940s, considered a first rank poet whose name or works stood out as much as a poet like her friend Zhāleh Esfahānī’s—let alone more prominent poets among women like Parvīn E‘tesāmī, Forugh Farrokhzād, or Sīmīn Behbahānī. Another anthology, no more serious than the previous one, was compiled by Seyyed Mohammad-Bāqer Borqa‘ī in 1993 in six volumes. Titled *Sukhanvarān-i Nāmī-yi Mu‘āsir-i Iran* (Iran’s Prominent Contemporary Poets), it introduces 702 poets in over 4000 pages. This is an expansion of a three-volume anthology the editor had published from 1950 to 1955. The anthology is arranged alphabetically and one expects A‘lāmī to be in the first volume, but she has not been included. Only when the editor decides to add six more complementary volumes (volumes 7-12, approximately 4700 pages) to his anthology in 2006, does A‘lāmī finally find inclusion in the seventh volume, and with six poems.

⁹Noureddīn Kīanourī, *Guft-o-gū bā tārikh—musāhibā bā Kīanourī—matn-i kāmil* (Tehran: Mu‘assasah-i Mutāla‘āt va Pizhuhishhā-yi Siyāsī, 2007), 124.

¹⁰See Noureddīn Kīanourī, *Khātirāt-i Noureddīn Kīanourī* (Tehran: Itilā‘āt, 1992), 485-86; A‘lāmī, *Yād’hā va nāmah’hā*, 99-101.

¹¹A' lāmī, *Yād'hā va nāmah'hā*, 122.

¹²A' lāmī, *Yād'hā va nāmah'hā*, 69.

¹³A' lāmī, *'Uqdah'hā-yi zindagī*, 36.

Asked by Bahram Choubīne about Zhāleh Esfahānī and their friendship, A' lāmī says:

Zhāleh is a very prolific poet and can write poems in any situation. I envy her, because I can't do the same. When I'm impacted and struck by something directly, I can write about it in the form of a poem. That's why most of my poems are about separation from homeland and the like. They asked me once in the *Tashkīlāt-i Zanān* ['Women's Organization,' or the Democratic Organization of Iranian Women—the women's wing of the Tudeh Party] to write a poem, and I said I couldn't. They reprimanded me! I can't write a poem when this or that person orders me to. My poem is a product of my feelings and I always have my own style.¹¹

She is implying that Zhāleh was the kind of poet that she herself could not be, i.e., Zhāleh's poems were presumably less sincere and had more the nature of mere versification of the topics dictated to her by the party. Had this been the case, one would have expected A' lāmī to be a more successful poet with more recognition than Zhāleh, while the opposite seems to be true. A closer look at these two poets, their lives and activities, and the reasons for the varying degrees of recognition that they enjoyed, could be the subject of another research.

The Tudeh Party, Women's Rights, and Three Books of Poems

A' lāmī became a member of the Tudeh Party in Isfahan and was arrested there when the party was banned (after an attempt on the Shah's life on 4 February 1949) and the persecution of its members began. She spent more than a year in jail;¹² the last few episodes/anecdotes in her *'Uqdah'hā-yi zindagī* show her impressions of this jail, which she calls "a large university."¹³ She moved later to Tehran and became more actively involved in *Tashkīlāt-i Zanān* and married Mahmud Zhandī [Mahmud Heydarī-Malāyerī, 1923-2006], a leading figure who worked under



the cover of a journalist and published the pro-Tudeh newspaper *Bi-sū-yi Āyandah* (Towards the Future). During these years, and before she had to flee from Iran following the 1953 Coup, A‘lāmī published poems that mostly described the miseries of the poor in the country, and these appeared in the newspapers and magazines published by Tudeh sympathisers, among them the satirical weekly *Chilingar* published by Mohammad-‘Alī Afrāshteh. She also wrote short articles and reports (like the report of her trip to Moscow, where she had been invited for a visit as a poet along with fifteen others),¹⁴ some of which were published in *Bi-sū-yi Āyandah*.

¹⁴A‘lāmī, *Yād’hā va nāmāh’hā*, 87.

¹⁵A‘lāmī, *Yād’hā va nāmāh’hā*, 103.

During her years of exile with her daughter in East Germany (while her husband was in jail in Iran), A‘lāmī was active in the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) and also studied at Humboldt University, where she took her PhD in Persian literature, writing her dissertation on the poet Parvīn E‘tesāmī. In the WIDF, she served as a representative to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women and as chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights (1973-77). She played an important role in the organization of the International Women’s Year in 1975. At the same time, she was a lecturer of Persian at Humboldt, working together with the author and fellow-Tudeh member Bozorg Alavī. In hindsight, she later regretted having not dedicated her time to poetry instead of politics. “I lived in East Germany for twenty-five years,” she says, “and could not publish a single line of poetry”¹⁵—by which she must mean a decrease in her productivity as a poet.

A‘lāmī decided rather late, only after being expelled to West Berlin from the East, to publish her writings and poems as books. The first book, *عقدہ های زندگی* (‘*Uqdah’hā-yi zindagī*; The Complexes [or Enigmas] of Life), was published in 1982 (re-printed in 1983), and it is comprised of twenty short episodes based on memories from childhood until after her imprisonment in Iran, the majority of them being about two pages long and written loosely as short stories/anecdotes, describing very

realistically the life of poor people around her and her family (peasants, labourers, servants, and the like), with a special focus on the plight of girls and women in a backward society. These anecdotes, written in a simple language to make them accessible to the less educated also, can sometimes be quite moving, but one does not see much effort used to shape them into artistically more serious short stories.

A'lāmī's poems are to be found in three books. The first of them is دهکده چم (Dihkadah-'i Cham; The Village Cham), a book of 220 pages (and seventy-one poems) published in Bonn in 1986. The copyright page also mentions the book as the first volume of the author's collected poems. However, when A'lāmī's next book of poems is published in 1991 (see below), there is no mention of that book being the second volume of collected poems.

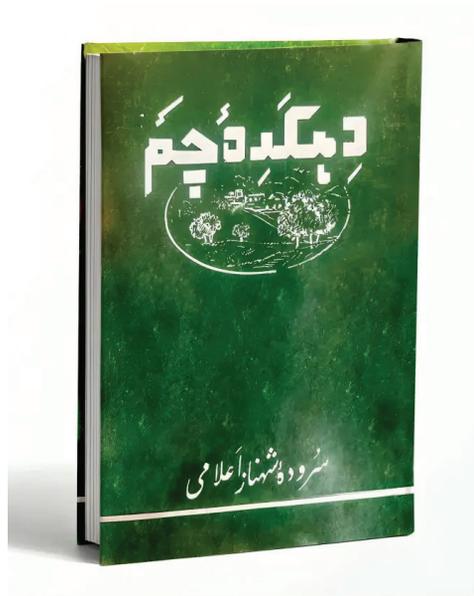


Figure 2: Book cover of Dihkadah-'i Cham; The Village Cham, 1986 bonn

The poems in Dihkadah-'i Cham are not dated, and one cannot

be sure if they have been arranged in any relatively chronological order; only the first poem is titled “1365 [1986] New Year’s Prayers,” while the Iranian date mentioned for the book’s publication is 1364. She may have been welcoming a year that had not started yet. After a most flattering note by the publisher, we read A‘lāmī’s own emotional preface in two pages. “I am a true child of my own generation,” she says in the beginning. “I was born in the vicinity of the desert.”¹⁶ The preface seems to be largely addressed to readers in Iran, complaining as it does about homesickness and begging for understanding and acceptance. A‘lāmī explains why she has decided to publish the book:

بیم دارم، شاید وقت آن رسیده باشد که در دهلیز نیستی فرو روم و برای همیشه زبان
گفتار بریندم، بدینجهت است که با تمام نارسائی کلامم، دلم می‌خواهد امواج روح
مضطربم را تا آنجا که مقدور است بازتاب دهم.

I fear that the time might have arrived for me to sink into the abyss of nonexistence, that is why I wish, despite the imperfection of my writing talents, to share and display the waves of my anxious soul.¹⁷

She concludes her preface by saying:

Dear [readers], be aware that this ‘prisoner’ has had no capital but ‘your love’ ... and has sought no aid or favour from any court but that of your affection.

Alas, that this pilgrim of your ‘abode of affection,’ in her efforts to find a way to the “جهان نجات” (world of salvage) was doomed to be trapped in ‘ظلمات’ (darkness) and not only found no ‘water of life’ there [a reference to the story of Khidr] but found herself sadly engulfed in the “گرداب حقایق تلخ” (whirlpool or abyss of bitter truths) and was lost.

Nevertheless, this passionate seeker of your affection, who became a captive to the ‘دیوان’ (devils), never broke her bond with ‘light,’ which is your ‘crystal soul’ and will never break it, because she followed ‘یزدان’ (God).

Now she is dedicating her book of poems to you.

¹⁶Shahnāz A‘lāmī, *Dihkadah-i Cham* (Bonn: Hafiz-Verlag, 1986), 11.

¹⁷A‘lāmī, *Dihkadah-i Cham*, 11.

¹⁸A'lāmī, Dihkadah-'i Cham, 12.

¹⁹A'lāmī, Dihkadah-'i Cham, 204.

Forgive the shortcomings, for these are not poems, but merely delirium.¹⁸

Apart from mentioning her homesickness, she manages here to hint at different things indirectly: 1) She sees now not just the Tudeh Party but the whole ideology of Communism as some abyss; 2) she defends herself against allegations of betrayal of her country or the people; 3) she still loves the people; 4) the word یزدان (yazdān, God) has some Zoroastrian associations, especially when we consider other references to light and darkness, and from here on, in this book and more clearly in the books that follow, we see some signs of affinity with Zoroastrian faith and its symbols, most clearly in these lines from a ghazal:

ایران من! پرستش آتشگهت کنم
گنجینهٔ ثمین نیاکان من، توئی

O my Iran! I worship your fire-temple;
You are the precious treasure of my forefathers.¹⁹

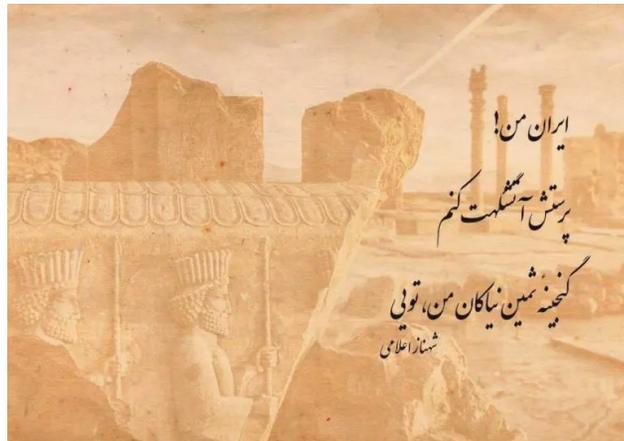


Figure 3: A'lāmī poetry in Persian language

About a quarter of the poems in this book (sixteen of them) have been written in traditional forms, a few more using different stanzaic forms, but the majority are free verse (meaning

Nimāic or free verse in meters), which must be a later development in her poetic experiments, although a few of them (about ten) totally avoid the use of meters. Interestingly, she shows relatively more competence when writing in traditional forms, which is characteristic of many of the poets of her generation.

The poem “Dar Bāgh-i Dīgarān” (In Others’ Garden) begins with the lines:

ای باغ دیگران!
گلریز و دلربائی و رنگین
پر بار و باشکوهی و زیبا!
اها!
باینهمه به جان تو ای باغ
یک موی باغ من به تنت نیست.

O garden of others!

You are full of flowers, heart-robbing and colorful

Fruit-laden, magnificent and beautiful!

But

However [sic.], I swear to your life, O garden!

There’s not a single hair from my garden on your body.²⁰

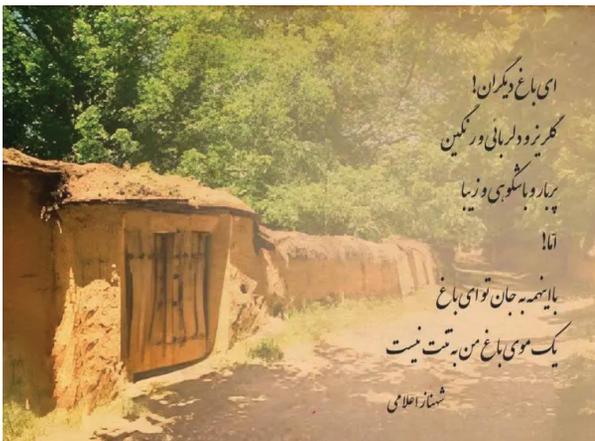


Figure 4: A 'lāmī poetry in Persian language

The rest of the poem is a praise of the beauties of the poet’s own

garden and its superiority when compared to the garden of ‘others.’ Her own garden is clearly where she grew up in Iran (references to pomegranates making it unmistakably clear); and one might assume that by the garden of others she simply means the country of her exile, but is it East Berlin or the West? Two poems that are among the masterpieces of modern Persian poetry, namely, “Dārvag” (Tree-Frog) by Nīmā Yushīj, written in the 1950s, and “Piyvand-hā va Bāgh” (Graftings and the Garden) by Mehdī Akhavān-Sāles, written in 1962, are both comparisons of the poet’s garden/farm/home with that of the neighbour, both poets finding the neighbour’s superior and enviable. What they meant in those poems by the neighbour’s garden/home, using a coded, symbolic language (to evade state censorship), was the Soviet Union and a just social system. A ‘lāmī was certainly aware of those poems and may have tried to convey the opposite here, albeit in a rather weak poem.

The poem “Faryād” (Cry, alas) belongs to the genre of “political ghazal” and, though undated, shows through images and references that it was written in the years after the Iran-Iraq War and after a wave of arrests and executions in Iran in the first half of the 1980s, close to the publication of the book. Some lines from the poem:

فریاد ز بیگانه و فریاد ز خویشان
ویران ز ستیز است و ستم معبد یزدان

آتشکده خاموش مگر گشته؟ چه رفته ست؟
ایران من از چیست به ماتمکده یکسان؟

از بس که جوان خفته به خاک است، تو گوئی
چون سنگ مزاری ست سراسر همه ایران

فرزند من است آنکه به چاه است چو بیژن
فرزند من است آنکه اسیر است به زندان

ضحاک زمانی دو جوان برد به هر روز
امروز طلب می کند از خلق هزاران



O the pain, the strangers and acquaintances alike!
 Yazdān's temple ruined by fighting and oppression.
 Is the fire-temple extinguished now? What has happened?
 Why does my Iran now resemble a house of mourning?
 With so many young people buried, the whole of Iran
 now resembles a gravestone.
 That's my son thrown into the well like Bizhan;
 that's my son thrown in prison.
 Once [the mythological] Zahhāk needed two youths to be sacrificed for him each day,
 now he is demanding that the people deliver him thousands.²¹

²¹A 'lāmī, *Dihkadah-i Cham*, 207-8.

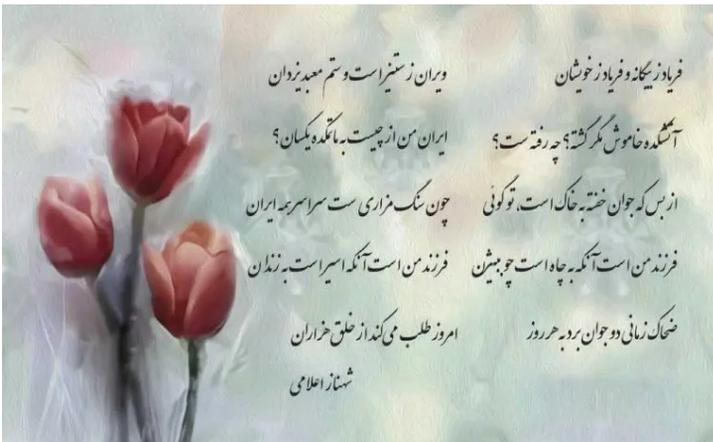


Figure 5: A 'lāmī poetry in Persian language

In 1991 A 'lāmī published the book *ترانه های جدائی* (Tarānah'hā-yi judā'i; Songs of Separation) in Saarbrücken, a book of eighty-eight ghazals in 190 pages. The word separation sets the tone for these mostly melancholic poems, and it is again separation from Iran which comes first to mind, but it should be noted that her second husband, Eckhardt Fichtner, had passed away some years earlier, in 1988. The book is dedicated to Fichtner's memory, who had been a professor at Humboldt University, and this 'separation' could also have played a role in writing at least some of these poems.

²²See A'lamī, Tarānah'hā-yi judā'ī (Saarbrücken: Navīd, 1991), 125.

²³A'lamī, Tarānah'hā-yi judā'ī, 83.

²⁴A'lamī, Tarānah'hā-yi judā'ī, 89.

²⁵A'lamī, Tarānah'hā-yi judā'ī, 127.

²⁶A'lamī, Tarānah'hā-yi judā'ī, 162.

Though not quite free of signs of weakness in poetic diction or syntax or occasionally even in using the meters,²² the reader can read most of them with some satisfaction and find here and there some gems also—some very successful couplets, such as the following:

گوهر ما را خریداری نباشد، گو مباش
گر بهای زر نداند کس نکاهد قدر آن

If my gem finds no purchaser, I wouldn't care;
the value of gold wouldn't decrease if people don't know what
it's worth.²³

یک عمر نغمه حنجره ام را فشرده بود
اکنون به فطره قطره به دفتر چکیده است

Songs of a lifetime had been pressing my throat;
now they're dripping on the page drop by drop.²⁴

خدا جنون من از چشم بد نگهدارد
در آن دیار که با عاقلان سر و کاریست (۱۲۷)

May God keep my insanity from the evil eye
in the land where you have to deal with sane people.²⁵

The reader who is familiar with A'lamī's life and what she has been through can occasionally find coded references hidden in images showing how the accusations of once-comrades like Kīānourī had hurt her:

این جراحاتی که بر پشت من است
تحفه ای از خنجر یاران بود

These wounds upon my back
are a gift from the dagger of friends.²⁶



In 1381 (2002/2003), about a year before she died, the book *برگزیده اشعار* (Barguzīdah-yi ash‘ār; Selected Poems) was published in Tehran; the poet’s name is mentioned as ط.ا.نائینی (T. A. Nā’ini), while “Shahnāz A‘lāmī” is added in brackets. “T” here stands for Tubā, her official first name. Publication of the book was apparently arranged by her daughter, as mentioned on the copyright page, and it would seem that A‘lāmī herself had little control over, or little chance of, proofreading, as the clumsy arrangement of the poems shows: inclusion of non-rubā‘īs among the rubā‘īs,²⁷ the placement of some shorter poems (quatrains) together as one poem,²⁸ and the like.

²⁷For example, A‘lāmī, *Tarānah/hā-yi judā’ī*, 164.

²⁸A‘lāmī, *Tarānah/hā-yi judā’ī*, 199-200.

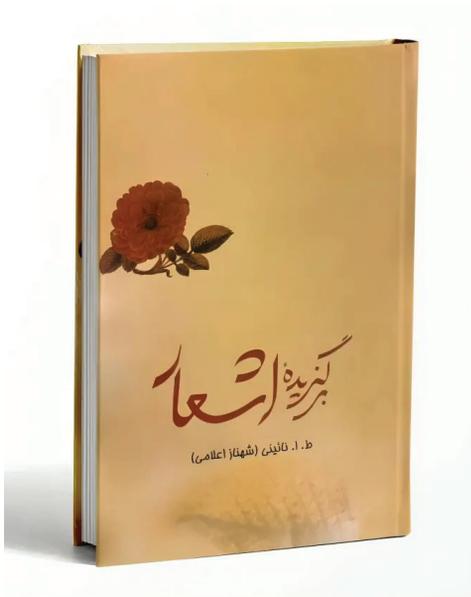


Figure 6: Book cover of *Barguzīdah-yi ash‘ār; Selected Poems*

The book opens with a short congratulatory note by Zabīhollāh Safā, a well-known scholar of Persian literature, who also lived in Germany. The note is dated 5 April 1997, which means that preparations for the publication of the book had started a few years earlier. Safā, who died in 1999, did not live to see the publication of the book, and his short note is not especially flat-

tering and shows his disapproval of some of the poems written in non-traditional forms.

The book *Barguzīdah-’i ash’ār* has eighty-seven poems (or 206, if we count each *rubā’ī* and quatrain—in one case, 121 of them grouped together under one title—separately); of these, twenty-eight had already been published in her first book of poems *Dihkadah-’i Cham* and twenty of them in *Tarānah’hā-yi judā’ī*, but the rest of them were being published here for the first time in book form. Whether some of them had appeared earlier in magazines is hard to say without thorough research. On the other hand, it is safe to say that A’lāmī still has more poems, possibly many more, that have not been included in these three books. For instance, the poems that can be found in the satirical weekly *Chilingar*, or the six poems found by Borqa’ī and included in the seventh volume of *Sukhanvarān-i Nāmī-yi Mu’āsir-i Iran* (2006), are not in these three books.

Other Writings

A’lāmī’s earlier years of collaboration with different publications of the Tudeh Party or other journals have given a journalistic character to some of her shorter articles. They are meant to be informative, or entertaining, or both; but they are usually not meant as serious academic research. A selected list of such articles (see below) will show the range of topics she was interested in writing about. *Naqsh-i zan-i Irānī dar adab-i Fārsī* (The Role of the Iranian Woman in Persian Literature), published in 1993 as a book, is in fact a longer article (about forty pages in length) appearing with its German translation (or, possibly originally written in German and then translated into Persian).

A’lāmī has written and published in German also. Some of these works are articles written during her years at Humboldt University, first as a PhD student and later as a lecturer. Together with Klaus Timm, she published in 1976 the book *Die muslimische Frau zwischen Tradition und Fortschritt—Frauenfrage*



und Familienentwicklung in Ägypten und Iran (Muslim Woman between Tradition and Progress—The Women’s Question and Family Development in Egypt and Iran). The book is comprised of two long articles only; Timm writes about women and family in Egypt, and A‘lāmī writes about Parvin E‘tesāmi in her article, titled “Iranische Dichterinnen im Streben nach Emanzipation und Fortschritt—Die Dichterin Parwin E‘tesāmī” (Iranian Women Poets in Pursuit of Emancipation and Progress—The Poet Parvīn E‘tesāmī). This is a well-researched article of over seventy pages, written in line with the dominant trend in literary criticism as approved and encouraged in East European countries in those years.