

In the galaxy of modern Iranian intellectuals, the late Shojaeddin Shafa was a rare star. By modern I mean those intellectuals who grew outside traditional religious institutions that, atrophied by lack of speculative courage, were bogged down by shabby shibboleths. There were also those who had spent time at madrasahs, people like Hassan Taqizadeh and Ali Dashti who were, subsequently, to discover broader horizons, without being fully able to jettison their religious baggage.

By the first decades of the 20th century, the clerics that had formed the main body of Iranian intelligentsia had shut themselves out of the real world. A new generation of secular intellectuals was asserting its claim of leadership. Although few were prepared to admit it, this new generation wished to see Iran regain a major place in the modern world through this or that mainstream Western ideology.

Between the 1940s and the 1970s, the period in which Shafa's generation was front stage, a majority of Iranian intellectuals saw themselves as part of a global left inspired by Socialism and Communism. By adopting a nationalist stance, Shafa was one of the few exceptions along with others such as Kazemzadeh Iranshahr, Zabih Behruz and Parviz Natal Khanlari.

Shafa believed that Iran should dig deep into its own history and culture to find elements that could form the foundations of a renewed national identity. To do that, Shafa insisted, Iran had to re-examine its relationship with Islam, especially in its duodecimal Shi'ite version. Echoing Jalaledin Mowlavi's famous dictum, Shafa wanted to take the core and throw the chaff to donkeys.

Although they had broken with religious traditions, many Iranian intellectuals could not or would not abandon the deep-rooted infliction of taqiyah or dissimulation. As a result, they developed a double life. They could be senior officials in a government and, at the same time, sympathetic to a radical ideology that wanted to overthrow it.

In this, too, Shafa was an exception. He had no qualms in working for the government and, in time, for the Imperial Court. He was deeply and sincerely

attached to Iran's ancient monarchy, a feature of "Iranian-ness" that distinguished Iran from the numerous "fabricated republics" that have mushroomed all over the world in the post-colonial era.

Shafa was an exception for yet another reason. He would not allow his official position and, in later years his closeness to the centre of power as the Shah's principal speech-writer, to dominate his life. Even in his busiest years as a high functionary, Shafa continued to do his intellectual work, reading, writing, translating, organizing conferences and, for a while, doing a weekly column for Kayhan, a newspaper that I edited at the time.

Over the years, Shafa produced a whole library of works distinguished by

The long years of exiles proved that, in his second career too, Agha Shoja was an exception. Now, he saw himself as a soldier engaged in a war that, in his opinion, had started with the Arab invasion of Iran over 14 centuries ago. In the first few years, Agha Shoja's seemed to belong to the club of lost causes. The "Arab affliction", as he called Islam, seemed to be triumphant and on the offensive on all fronts. Nothing could stop the self-assured Khomeinist ideology that, having seized control of the Iranian state, dreamed of world conquest in the name of its brand of Islam.

Once again, Shafa proved an exception in his foresight. He was among the first to realize that Khomeinism was a nine-day wonder, an epiphenomenon that, despite the damage it could do to Iran, would not be able to alter the fundamentals of Iranian life.

Initially, in exile, Shafa looked like a lone ranger, fighting almost alone, and his audience limited to a handful of nostalgia-stricken monarchists.

He, however, knew otherwise. What mattered, he would say even in the darkest days, is for those who believe in Iran, a different Iran, an ideal Iran, even an Iran that might not become reality in their life-time, is to work and work and work.

In time, Shafa became a best-selling author once again, although his books topped the black list established by the Ministry for Islamic Guidance and Culture in Tehran. Both among the millions of Iranians in exile

and for many more inside Iran, Shafa's message has found a resonance far beyond what his friends hoped and his foes feared.

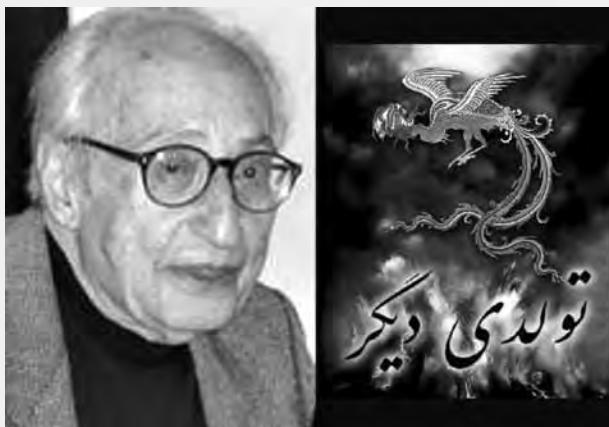
Shafa's war against obscurantism was, and remains, Iran's war. In that war, a true fighter does not set time-limits; nor does he even make his participation in battle conditional on a guarantee of victory.

"Iranians have fought in this war for more than fourteen hundred years," he would say. "They may have to fight for many more years. That fight has defined us as a nation, prevented us from losing our identity, and inspired the creation of our rich culture." Shafa's message was: the fight must go on!

Agha Shoja, the fight will go on!
END. ■

Shojaeddin Shafa

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their eclectic extent and excellence. Had things ended in 1978, Shafa would have been remembered as a major literary figure of modern Iran. His masterly crafted prose, his superb taste in choosing works for translation, and the vast spectrum of his interests had already assured him more than a pedestal.

In the cold days at the end of 1978, when the Khomeinist insurrection was provoking fire and bloodshed in some of our cities, no one knew that Agha Shoja, as friends called him, was destined for a second, and entirely different, career as political philosopher, social critic and nationalist activist.

But that is how history works; it is never written in advance.