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Different Interpretations of the Semantics of Space in *The Gypsy by The Fire* (*Kouli-ye kenar-e atash*) by Moniru Ravanipur

Abstract

This article addresses the potency of semantics of space in Modern Iranian literature by analyzing a novel by Moniru Ravanipur, one of the most distinguished authors of the post-revolutionary period, *The Gypsy by the Fire* (*Kouli-ye kenar-e atash*). It argues that spatial dimensions become the constructional axis of the novel, binding together its different components. Just as skillfully Ravanipur operates between classical Persian literary notions of space and Modern psychological and cultural theories of place and travel, proving both the worldliness of her own craft and Modern Iranian Fiction.

Keywords: Modern Iranian Fiction, Moniru Ravanipur, Semantics of Space, Female Writers.

Modern Iranian literature may sometimes seem obscure, leading some scholars to doubt its technical perfection and accusing writers of the unskilled imitation of Western forms. It seems to me that a contradiction has occurred between two paths of research: one relying on modern Western theory, and another on the comparison with traditional Persian paths and motifs. This seems to be rather confusing as Iranian fiction has proven to be embedded in both domestic traditions and cosmopolitan ideas. This article is my small tribute to Marek Smurzyński, my first teacher of Iranian literature, whose lectures and research have in my opinion clearly demonstrated the necessity of a dual approach to such literary phenomena. The aim of this article is to demonstrate openness to interpretation as a key feature of a Modern Iranian literary text. In the case of *Kouli-ye kenar-e atash* (*The Gypsy by the Fire*, 1991) by Moniru Ravanipur, the more that methodological approaches are applied, the more hidden layers reveal themselves.

Ravanipur's fiction has been called both a representative of "regional literature" (*adabiyat-e eqlimi*) or Magical Realism (*realism-e jadu*)¹ belonging to important movements in Persian literature. On the other hand, Ravanipur has also been perceived as an important feminist writer, with most of her characters being females in pursuit of their identity in a male-dominated culture.² Her work has, however, been criticized as an imitation of Latin American Magical Realism. In fact, although one cannot deny such a resemblance, it should rather be considered as a display of the *wordliness* of third world literature, as Edward Sa'id puts it, rather than imitation.³ Ravanipur's work is deeply embedded in Iranian culture, mostly the local folklore of the writer's native Persian Gulf region. *Kouli...* has been intertextually linked with classical Persian literature, itself supplying an important interpretative context. Through the retelling old legends and myths, Ravanipur (who is, by the way, a psychologist) also takes advantage of psychoanalysis and is up to date with current intellectual discussions that have proven to no longer be just "Western". Sometimes underestimated by Iranian scholars⁴ as derivate and obscure, her fiction effectively tackles socially important questions of female identity in male-dominated traditional culture.⁵ What is more, although complicated and intermingled with dreams and fantasies, as well as occasional examples of author interference, the pieces have a well thought-out structure.

Kouli... is a story of a young Gypsy, Ayene, who is excluded from her tribe and left behind after she breaks the tribe's law. She tries to find her lover, but she fails since he has already left for his native Tehran. She travels from Bushehr to Shiraz and from Shiraz to Tehran in search of her love. In her journey she is disgraced and oppressed by people who treat her as a person of no origin and without family guidance. She also makes friends, the most important of whom will be a group of women who have had to leave their homes for different reasons. Eventually she arrives in revolutionary Tehran, but instead of finding her lover, she finds herself becoming a painter.

Due to the somewhat complex structure and literary means implied by the author in *Kouli-ye kenar-e atash*, the book invites a multilayered interpretation. Yet what seems to me to bind the different layers of the book together is its spatial dimension and in this article I address its semantic potency.

¹ N. Rahimieh, *Ahl-e Garq* [in:] *Encyclopædia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ahl-e-garq> (accessed: 20.12.2015); Hasan Mirabedini describes her writings as „adabiyat-e eqlimi” with “Marqueezian Magical Realism style”, H. Mirabedini, *Sad sal-e dastan-nevisi-ye Iran*, vol. 3, 2nd ed., Tehran 1380 (2001) p. 830–831.

² K. Talatof, *Iranian Women's Literature: From Pre-Revolutionary Social Discourse to Post-Revolutionary Feminism*, “International Journal of Middle East Studies”, no. 29(4), November, 1997, p. 531–558, p. 547.

³ N. Rahimieh, *Magical Realism in Moniru Ravanipur's Ahl-e gharq*, “Iranian Studies” 1990, no. 23(1/4), p. 61–75; p. 63 and E. Said, *Criticism/Self-Criticism*, “Lingua Franca” 1992, February/March, p. 43.

⁴ In the best known comprehensive study on Modern Iranian fiction Hasan Mirabedini praises Ravanipur's style in *Kouli...*, but he is reluctant when it comes to structural consistency of the novel: H. Mirabedini, op. cit., pp. 1352–1353.

⁵ K. Talatof, *Breaking Taboos in Iranian Women's Literature: The Work of Shahrnush Parsipur*, “World Literature Today” 2004, no. 78(3/4), September–December, p. 548.

It was in 1958 that Gaston Bachelard published his *Poetics of Space* and starting from the next decade we can witness what was called the spatial turn in a variety of research fields comprising not just literary studies, but also cultural studies, philosophy and sociology. It suffices to mention Henry Lefebvre's studies, the theory of heterotopy by Foucault or non-places by Marc Augé. Furthermore, the geography has been anthropomorphized and the word "map" and "mapping" made a great career in psychology and cognitive studies. Mapping mental spaces became a widespread research practice. One can say that space, any kind of space, is now primarily considered as mental construction, as it is the interpretation and individual experience, world view, etc., that constructs the space out of the pieces of physically existing places. They are interconnected both in and by our mind. This does not mean, however, that they lack individuality or personality. The places we experience influence our behavior and feelings yet it is for human cognition to make the connections.

In Iranian culture, the life of women has largely been preconditioned by spatial dimensions. The woman is supposed to stay at home, in *andaruni* (internal part of the house), out of social reality of external men's world. Farzaneh Milani stresses immobility as the main metaphor of the limitations imposed on women⁶, who would not be allowed to go out. That is indeed the most common situation in traditional culture although it is not the case with Ayene. She is a dancing gypsy, embedded in nature rather than culture, seemingly free to do what she wants. Unexpectedly, she appears to be a prisoner despite there being no physical bonds or walls around her. What keeps her in place are the social conventions and invisible hand of tribal law, as well as her own inability to live on her own. What she does after she has been abandoned by the tribe is not only to search for her Tehranian lover, but rather a quest for her own place in the society as an individual. She eventually finds her language as a painter, thus it seems only naturally that the path towards her destiny leads through the discovery of a sequence of places. On her way from one picture to another she learns to read the personality and meaning hidden in places she visits and actually they guide her towards social realms too.

It is difficult to find a language for female experience in the male-dominated culture. The character experiences history rather as a subject, not an object, hence she cannot understand or name the processes she is taking part in. She finds herself in the middle of crucial historical events and social changes but she is not capable of understanding them.

The same problem of an adequate descriptive language can be noticed in the writings of another important Persian female author, Shahrnush Parsipur. Her characters desperately rely on the literal meaning of phrases that lead them to faulty conclusions such as virginity being a curtain or that the Bolsheviks cut women into pieces.⁷ Their experience is hardly available to the standard language

⁶ F. Milani, *Words, not Swords. Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement*, Syracuse – New York 2011.

⁷ S. Parsipur, *Tuba va ma'na-ye shab*, 5th ed., Tehran 1382 (2001), p. 122; S. Parsipur, *Zanan bedun-e mardan*, Tehran 1360 (1991); K. Talattof, *Breaking Taboos...*, p. 43–46; p. 44.

and one could say they do not reach for the symbolical layer of culture. They are still children in the Lacanian sense⁸, and hence they have not developed symbolical cognition as if it were solely masculine. In Ravanipur the experience of revolution is drawn as a spatial experience. It is the journey and unknown places that she is deeply affected by, that build her inner world. It can be seen equally as a resemblance of the mystical journey of Persian classical tradition and a psycho-analytical journey towards adulthood. The symbolic ending of Ayene's childhood is her father's death and it is this which closes the book too. The journey towards adulthood comes to an end at the same place it began, albeit changed. The tribe has settled, it has become a part of the city, yet for its members the city has become familiar, just as it has for Ayene, the avant-garde.

Ayene is a daughter of nature. There is a gap between the space that she is used to as a gypsy – the open space of nature – and places that she visits later and that seem to be a part of an unknown entity. The classical Bachelardian notion of home as security⁹ is reversed for Ayene. The city is the opposite of nature.¹⁰ First she can only see a city as an entity, scary and unfamiliar. Then, in Shiraz, she is introduced to places and it is no coincidence that it is here that she first tries to live in a house. However the heterotopical cemetery¹¹ in which dead people intermingle (even on the terms of sexual intercourse) with their living counterparts seem more familiar to her than the alien spaces of the living city. As her self-awareness develops, she comes to the conclusion that her own world has always been ruled by the laws of dead people: "They live inside us in such a way that we do not realize it", she says.¹² Thus, she has been used to living with the dead and she is not afraid of the vivid organism of the cemetery sometimes causing madness and feeding itself with its inhabitants.¹³

In the city nothing remains natural anymore. The garden is no longer a promise of freedom and it feeds itself with the youth of girls.¹⁴ There is hardly any difference between the garden and the factory ("like a jealous man")¹⁵ with both turning human beings into slaves. The places which are seemingly full of life in the city are actually those that one should avoid, any resemblance to country life prove deceitful and it takes time to discover the hidden logic or even unity of the city. Step by step Ayene learns about culture and its communicational paths. If she eventually succeeds it is also due to the multiplication of her experiences. When she arrives in Tehran she is no longer lonely, she belongs to a group of women who share the same fate. They even try to enter somebody else's shoes, when they occupy an empty house and wear the clothes of its absent owners. She and her friends go as far as to use the names of the Armenian girls whose lives

⁸ J. Lacan, *Écrits. First Complete Edition in English*, trans. B. Fink, New York – London 2006.

⁹ G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston 1969, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹¹ In Foucaultian sense: M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences*, London – New York 1989, p. XIX.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 98–99.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 237–238.

they are imitating.¹⁶ Recognition of this new space is difficult, but once adopted, spatial cognition turns into a figure for social cognition too. This is a process, the women are initially so naive as to define the revolution by a single situation, e.g. revolution means: “people who gather by the university, people who buy a book, a magazine, a statue and sometimes do not want their change”.¹⁷ The revolution is beyond their understanding, but what they undoubtedly experience is the movement it causes as it turns the traditional order to ashes. Their cognitive abilities are reminiscent of the way an immature child understands the surrounding world, that is by their physical experiences of space without the social schemata in interactions.¹⁸ They fear the crowd as they cannot understand it¹⁹, but they sympathize with the city that becomes a figure of the revolution.²⁰ The movement turns the parts of the city into the parts of a body that has been threatened and beaten by the oppressors, just like Ravanipur’s female characters: “The dark and empty city. Each part of its body has turned black and blue. It has suffered from beatings and bullet wounds. The smell of pepper has made it sneeze. It was confused and it didn’t even know who got hurt”.²¹ The same happens to different places constructing the body of the city, to the university in particular, making it “shout like a madman”.²²

The efficiency of Ravanipur’s spatial semantics lies in the way she interconnects cosmopolitan motifs of Modern psychoanalytical and literary thought with Iranian tradition. The references to classical literature in the novel are unmistakable. At first Ayene is just a Gypsy (*kouli*), a typical character of Persian literature. She knows no other world but dancing for the tribe’s guests who come from the city. As she dances, she unexpectedly turns into a moth (literary: a butterfly – *parvane*) devastated by the power of fire, that is love which is equally inspiring and devastating. A butterfly is another common symbol, the symbol of a lover desperately trying to unify with its beloved, that is a candle, and turning into ashes as a result. The fire causes internal change, both for the *parvane* and for the gypsy of Ravanipur’s novel. Ayene takes up a journey to find and join her lover in Tehran. Every detail seems meaningful here. It is not by accident that the girl’s name means “the mirror”. In Persian tradition it has long been the symbol of a Sufi’s pure heart that should reflect the beauty of creation and after undergoing mystical change, the beauty of the Creator himself (as the creation turns up to be a mirror too). Ayene goes on reflecting settings. Her journey resembles a mystical journey which is very familiar to Persian culture. Taking into account that the other women join her and they travel together towards the hidden truth, the story brings to mind *The Conference of Birds* by Farid-al-Din Attar (1145–1221) in which

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 229.

¹⁸ G. Lakoff, *Woman, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal About Our Mind*, Chicago – London 1987.

¹⁹ M. Ravanipur, *Kouli-ye kenar-e atash*, Tehran 1370 (1991), p. 225, 235.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 243.

²¹ Ibid., p. 243.

²² Ibid., p. 229.

birds travel to find their king, Simorgh, who turns out to be the reflection of the thirty birds (*si morgh*) that eventually reach the destination. Their spiritual journey has been mapped by their physical journey, in which they pass through seven valleys full of dangers and in each suffer in a manner corresponding to a certain level of the Sufi path towards the truth (*tariqa*). So it is with Ayene. Farzaneh Milani has attributed the name of the Modern *Conference of the Birds* to Women without Men by Shahrnush Parsipur,²³ yet *Kouli-ye kenar-e atash* seems to have every right to the name. Although Ayene encounters no Simorgh, in this Modern interpretation it is rather herself since she becomes a painter in order to show her own point of view. On the way she encounters places well known from classical poetry, even though they are given some new, more individual meanings, as her journey through the culture is also a psychoanalytical journey towards adulthood. She is not on her own – we can see her speaking to the internal god of the text – the author who makes Ayene become a mirror of changing reality of the country after the revolution against her will. Ayene is indeed more than an individual, she is a mirror of the revolution, whose internal changes reflect social changes too. One could even call her a Modern Simorgh, although the same name could be given to Tehran – the city that suffers the same fate as the travelers.

The final internal change of Ayene takes shape gradually by visiting three spaces: the church, house of a teacher and finally the tribe where she says goodbye to her dying father. These places could not be more meaningful. The church is not just a sanctuary, it stands in opposition to the mosque like Zoroastrian fire temples (*deir-e moghan*) in *sufi* literature and it eventually turns out to be “the ruins” (*kharabe, kharabat*)²⁴ – the place standing for libation gatherings. These kind of places should be avoided by pious Muslims, attending them seems at odds to sharia’, but for those influenced by *Malamati* movement they are most desirable as there is no better way towards God for them than by losing one’s reputation, the strongest bonds with the earthy conditions. Ayene’s teacher is a painter, who introduces her to the world of artists as a *sufi* master introduces his student to mysticism. His house very much reminds one of a *khanegah*, the *sufis*’ gathering.²⁵ He encourages Ayene to open her inner eye, again very much a *sufi* practice, by abandoning other people’s ideas (like Mariam and Jesus she was told about by the priest). This choice of places brings to mind the intertextual discussion on social and sharia’ limits between classical open minded poets who express their straightforward longing for disreputable places that have no power over the one burned in the fire of love (Moulana) or the libertine (*rend, Hafiz*).²⁶ These places symbolize a freedom achieved by maturity, be it for the classical poet or the modern female character.

To conclude, I have analyzed *The Gypsy by the Fire* by Moniru Ravanipur from the perspective of the semantics of space. I have argued that spatial dimen-

²³ F. Milani, op. cit., p. 193–194.

²⁴ M. Ravanipur, op. cit., p. 266.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 247–250.

²⁶ F. Lewis, *Hafez VIII. Hafez and Rendi* [in:] *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, vol. XI, fasc. 5, p. 483–491, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-viii> (access: 15.12.2015).

sions create an axis of the novel's construction, linking many different layers of narration such as plot, characters and temporal dimensions. Traditional and revolutionary space have been set in opposition to one another with the former, seemingly more natural and free, turning out to be deceitful: the tribe proves to be tied by the law of dead people, thus its freedom of movement transpires to be false; the garden is as dangerous as the factory with both trapping human beings. It is the revolutionary movement in the long shot and the personal journey towards adulthood on the individual level, two corresponding layers of the narrative, that diversifies the traditional order. Both are expressed in spatial terms (as spatial constructs) through the characterization of the different places they comprise and their interrelations. Ravanipur's novel could be so far regarded as a universal representative of the spatial turn in the literature of the late 20th century. It should be stressed, however, that the individual journey is apparently a Modern reinterpretation of Persian classical motif of the mystical path towards the Truth. In the novel it leads through places attributable to the *sufi* tradition (such as the garden, church or cemetery) or belonging to the Modern world (as e.g. the factory). Not only has Ravanipur used classical motifs and connotations chosen and rearranged due to the inner logic of the novel's construction, but she has also reinstated the intertextual spatial discourse of the classics. In her heterotopies (e.g. cemetery) one can see the reflection of Moulana's and Hafiz's passages on disrespectful places that can either compromise a visitor or be conquered by a strong personality. Like for a *sufi*, it is essential for the female characters of the novel not to surrender to the deceitful *genius loci*, but to continue the journey. *Kouli-ye kenar-e atash* skillfully chooses the elements of movement in classical texts and correlates them with the Modern notion of the revolution perceived as a "social movement" *per se*. The revolution is described as an awakening of the city organism comprising of such body parts as streets, places and university. These two (individual and social) layers of spatial movement meet in the experience of the characters sympathizing with the oppressed revolutionary city, a figure of their personal fate. Through this experience they finally familiarize a city that used to be strange to them. It is through this experience that they open their way to culture and social cognition that as the women they had been deprived of in traditional community. They learn from places and their inhabitants what they had never learnt at school and social interactions. This cognition seems to be an alternative to standard men's cognition and one could claim a resemblance not only the child's first experiences, but also to the mythical cognition of IndoIranians with its strong links between micro- and macrocosms replaced here by the individual and society, the body of a woman and the city. Notabene, other female writers in post-revolutionary Iran (e.g. Shahrnush Parsipur) also attributed rather intuitional than intellectual cognition to female characters deprived of education and social skills. As a result of this cognition, Ravanipur's characters achieve the aim of their journey: adulthood and individual identity too. Preserving the Iranian cultural milieu, Ravanipur universalizes her craft by deliberating over the psychological notions of childhood and journey towards adulthood as well as the interdependence of individual and the society. Thus she succeeds in touching upon important questions of the per-

sonal and group identity of Iranian women, the kind of questions that, as Nicholas J. Entrikin points out, are closely linked up with place and culture.²⁷

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²⁷ N.J. Entrikin, *The Betweenness of Place: Towards the Geography of Modernity*, Baltimore 1991, p. 4.