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Fattâne Hâjj Seyyed Javâdi's *Bâmdâd-e khomâr*: Trivial Novel or Serious Fiction?

Abstract

This article aims to show that Fattâne Hâjj Seyyed Javâdi's novel *Bâmdâd-e khomâr* ("The Morning After") is not a trivial novel, as some literary critics have it, but a modernist, well-written novel that treats modern conceptions of love, sexuality and tradition in an indirect, but still obvious way.

Keywords: Contemporary Persian literature; the novel; conceptions of tradition, love, sexuality, and reason.

When Fattâne Hâjj Seyyed Javâdi's novel *Bâmdâd-e khomâr* ("The Morning After") was published in 1995, it became immediately a success with the Iranian readers, and it is probably the most widely read novel in recent Persian literature. Among the literary critics, however, the novel divided the waters. Some saw the novel as a colourful, cliché ridden piece of trivial literature, while others considered it a well-written novel with a complex structure and a many layered message.¹ This short article will side with the last mentioned critics, and it will try to demonstrate through a selective reading of the novel that *Bâmdâd-e khomâr* is not a trivial novel, but rather a modernist literary text with a modernist message about love, sexuality, and reason.

The title of Fattâne Hâjj Seyyed Javâdi's novel is taken from one of Sa'di's verses saying that شب شراب نیرزد به بامداد خمار (*Shab-e sharâb nayarzad be bâmdâd-e khomâr*, "The night of inebriation is not worth the morning of hangover").²

¹ For the reception of *Bâmdâd-e khomâr*, see Afsaneh Najmabadi's *The Morning After: Travail of Sexuality and Love in Modern Iran*, "International Journal for Middle East Studies" 2004, no. 36, p. 367–385, and Ali Ferdowsi's article, *BÂMDÂD-E KÔMÂR* [in:] *Encyclopædia Iranica*, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/bamdad-e-komar>.

² See Ali Ferdowsi quoted above. The translation in the quote belongs to Ali Ferdowsi.

As the title implies and the novel is set up, the readers of *Bâmdâd-e khomâr* is presented – at the first sight – with a moral tale (*dâstân-e ‘ebrat*). The novel has a narrative frame, a conversation between a young girl, Sudâbe, and her aunt, Mahbube, who tells her niece the story of (a part of) her life. This life story is the main story of *Bâmdâd-e khomâr*, and it takes place in early modern Iran in the 1920s and the 1930s.

The niece Sudâbe wants to marry a boy of her own choice, a boy who does not belong to her own social class, the upper-middle class, and her parents are against the marriage. As the parents are unable to persuade Sudâbe not to marry the boy, whom she loves passionately, her mother asks the aunt to tell Sudâbe her story, which resembles Sudâbe’s what concerns perceived wrong choice of husband. The idea is that aunt Mahbube’s story will work as a moral and didactic story and make Sudâbe abstain from her marriage plans.

When Mahbube was young she was a beautiful, educated, and headstrong upper-class girl, very much alike Sudâbe at the time of the narration of the story, probably in the 1960s or 1970s. Mahbube had the possibility of – and she was expected to – marrying into one of the other upper-class families, in which many handsome and educated young men from her own social class waited for her, among others her cousin Mansur. Mahbube says, however, no to all suitors as she has fallen in love with a young and physically attractive apprentice carpenter, Rahim, whom she has caught a glimpse of in town. On her own and with some difficulty because of the segregation of both sexes and classes in Iran of the time, Mahbube contacts Rahim, who belongs to the lowest stratum of Iranian society. By this, Mahbube has violated all moral and social rules, and when her parents learn of her doings and plans of marrying Rahim, they become furious. Although Mahbube’s father is a progressive and enlightened person measured by the standards of the time, he cannot accept neither his daughters behavior nor choice of husband. In the end, however, her father realizes that he has to give in to his daughter’s choice of husband. He arranges a low-key wedding, buys the young couple a house and Rahim a carpenter’s shop, and sends Mahbube a sum of money every month for house-keeping. Mahbube’s father does not believe, though, that the marriage will last, and as a sign of his disapproval of the marriage he breaks off any direct contact between his daughter and his own household.

Mahbube and Rahim live happily together a year or more, and Mahbube becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son. But shortly after the birth of the son, the young couple’s married life takes a fatally wrong turn. Their different social and cultural backgrounds show and prove to be incompatible. This in combination with the influence of Rahim’s obnoxious mother, who has moved in, make their life together miserable. Rahim begins drinking heavily, beats Mahbube, and their little son dies, because Rahim’s mother fails to look after him properly. Mahbube becomes pregnant again, but loses the child, and finally she gives up and returns to her father’s home. Her father takes care to pay off Rahim and gets Mahbube a divorce. The end of story is that Mahbube feels compelled to marry again, this time with the above mentioned cousin Mansur as his second wife, a marriage based on reason. Mansur has earlier married Nîmtâj, another upper-class girl, as

he could not have Mahbube, but marries also the latter, as he has never stopped loving her. Nimtāj accepts the new second wife, at first reluctantly, later wholeheartedly, and Mahbube becomes also a second mother of Nimtāj's children, as she cannot have her own. She has become sterile after the abortion of the second child. Unfortunately both Mansur and Nimtāj die in a relatively young age, and Mahbube has to move in with her younger brother, Sudābe's father. Mahbube's destiny becomes, then, a life without a family of her own and a shadowy presence in her brother's home.

Bāmdād-e khomār is a moral and moralizing story, at least on the surface. Mahbube's life story seems to be a warning to Sudābe and the readers about the tragic consequences of untamed love as the basis of marriage. Traditional and rational rules about social and cultural compatibility between man and woman, in the form they are a part of the procedures of arranged marriages, must be followed, otherwise the marriage will prove to fail and end as a tragedy, the way Mahbube's marriage did. Love ('*eshq*') must never take precedence over reason ('*aql*'). Translated into cultural and social rules, according to *Bāmdād-e khomār*, it seems that a man and a woman must be (relatively) equal in class, culture, manners and education in order to enter into a harmonious marriage.

Ironically, however, many parts of aunt Mahbube's story and remarks contradict the moral admonition of the novel sketched above. As also Najmabadi (referred to above) notes in her article about *Bāmdād-e khomār*, Mahbube begins her admonishing story by exchanging the following words with her niece Sudābe about the niece's object of choice:

که گفتی خیلی دوستش داری؟...
سودابه شیفته وار پاسخ داد: آره عمه جان.
خدا به دادت برسد دختر جان. خدا به دادت برسد.³

So did you say that you love him a lot?

Sudābe answered love-struck: Yes auntie.

God help you, dear girl, God help you.

Mahbube's outburst, "God help you!", indicates that the aunt from the very beginning of her story do not believe that she can alter Sudābe's marriage plans, as the niece is so deeply in love. A little earlier, Mahbube has also made clear that she will only tell Sudābe her life story, and then it is entirely up to her niece to make a decision, to marry or not marry her loved but to her "inferior" one.⁴ And, as a last aspect of the narrative frame commenting on the main story, Mahbube shows very few signs of regrets over the choices she made as a young girl. The main point of *Bāmdād-e khomār* seems, then, *not* to be a narration of the preference of entering into a marriage based on reason and the compatibility, with regard to class and culture, of man and woman. The main message, I believe, lies hidden in between Mahbube's story of her life and the narrative frame; and it has to do with love based on both physical attraction and reason.

³ 7th impression, Tehran 1375 (1996), p. 16. جاج سید جوادی، فتانه، بامداد خمار

⁴ Ibid., p. 11: "I can only tell you the story of my life. After that it is you who must take a decision".

One of the most important passages in Mahbube's narrative – in my interpretation – can be found towards the end of the novel. It is a scene in which Mahbube admits to her second husband that her infatuation with Rahim was sexual and nothing else. In very direct words she says about her love for her first husband:

آن که عشق نبود، هوس بود. منصور، هوس، که مثل برق زد و سوخت...

...it was not love, it was sexual desire. Mansur, sexual desire, which struck like lightning and burned out.

A little while before these words, Mahbube has by a slip of the tongue called Mansur for Rahim. And a little later in the narration, Mahbube dreams a dream in which Mansur's and Rahim's personalities melt together in Mansur's character. This points to the fact that Mahbube's love for Mansur, which previously was based on reason (*'aql*) and compatibility of class and culture, has changed into a love based on both reason and physical attraction. Put in other words, based on both spiritual and physical love. On the grounds of her earlier decisions and life, Mahbube is in the context of the novel's understanding destined to a life without a family and without the ability to bear children, which is also why Mansur must die as a part of the story and plot. The niece Sudâbe must for her part wait and see, if her future life will bring her the ideal combination of physical and spiritual attraction embodied in the man she chooses as her husband. The likelihood that Sudâbe will obtain this ideal of a husband and of love may seem faint, considering the aunt's words to her: "God help you, dear girl, God help you". But probably the author of *Bâmdâd-e khomâr* wishes to convey another in the moral tale embedded message to her readers⁶, a message that takes its starting point in the character of the headstrong and resistant Sudâbe. Maybe Sudâbe *will* succeed in transgressing the borders of class and culture and break with the tradition of choosing a husband from one's own circles, not ignoring the important aspect of physical attraction. The readers leave Sudâbe in a state of doubt but not in a state of hopelessness at the very end of the novel. At any rate, after having told her story, Mahbube leaves Sudâbe with these telling thoughts:

سودابه سخت در فکر فرو رفته بود. می کوشید تصمیم بگیرد ولی دیگر کار ساده ای نبود. شراب شبانه را می طلبید و از خماری بامداد بیمناک بود. شاید این طبیعت بود که می رفت تا دوباره پیروز شود. آیا تاریخ بار دیگر تکرار می شود?⁷

⁵ Ibid., p. 427.

⁶ Here I imply that the author of *Bâmdâd-e khomâr* on purpose has hidden her main message within a moral tale. Najmabadi (referred to above) suggests that Hâj Seyyed Javâdi's text works against its author's intention of writing a moral tale celebrating 'traditional conventions' of how to contract a harmonious marriage and "...invites readings against its main plot". See p. 373–376 and for the last quote p. 374. On this point I disagree with Najmabadi. I think that the main message is communicated deliberately, although indirectly, through the relation there is between the narrative frame, aunt Mahbube and niece Sudâbe's conversation, and Mahbube's story of her life.

⁷ بامداد خماری, p. 439 (last page of the novel).

Sudâbe was deeply immersed in thoughts. She tried to make a decision, but it was not an easy task. She thirsted for the night's wine and feared the morning of hangover. Maybe it was [only] nature that would be victorious again [as in Mahbube's infatuation with Rahim]. Will history repeat itself yet again?

To conclude: In my reading of *Bâmdâd-e khomâr*, the novel begins as and even pretends to be a moral tale (*dâstân-e 'ebrat*). It also shares tradition's view of how to contract a marriage, at least one part of it, namely that reason (*'aql*) must play a role. But here the agreement between novel and tradition ends. Mahbube made a mistake by letting only sexual desire rule in her first marriage, yes, but that does not mean that physical attraction should not count, and for a woman – and by implication also a man – it should not be seen in opposition to marrying outside one's social and cultural class. Even if it is a upper-class girl who seeks union with a lower-class apprentice carpenter. The ideal is – as in Mahbube's temporal happy union with Mansur based on rational (*'âqelâne*) deliberations as well as on spiritual and physical attraction – a love rooted in even shares of reason and physical attraction, free of traditional ideas of class and cultural compatibility. In this respect, Fattâne Hâjj Seyyed Javâdi's novel *Bâmdâd-e khomâr* is not just another trivial moralist novel, but rather a modernist literary text with a modernist message about ideal love, the combination and compatibility of sexual as well as spiritual attraction, and reason.

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