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Literature as Dialogue: On the Example of Three Short Stories (by Hedāyat, Āl-e Ahmad and Dānešvar)

Abstract

Modern Persian literature can be assessed as an internally integrated system of interrelated texts which engage in mutual inspirations, dialogues and references. How it occurs is demonstrated on the example of three short stories by three 20th century authors: Hedāyat, Āl-e Ahmad and Dānešvar. The stories are connected through their common motif of a mother abandoning her child; their mutual relationship is of a dialogical and partly also polemical character.

Keywords: Modern Persian fiction, intertextuality, common motifs, abandoned child.

Marek Smurzyński planned a large work on Persian literary post-modernism. Not much survived of his project[1], but one of the issues he intended to concentrate on, was the referentiality in contemporary Persian prose, as a feature common of both, post-modernistic and classical, Persian literary periods.

An intertextual and referential character of classical Persian literature is beyond discussion. Rigorous poetical forms and a canonical, limited store of themes made the poets walk on one anothers' tracks, to rework and reinterpret the circulating concepts.[2] On the other hand, the traditional ways of transmission themselves – oral and manuscript – resulted in tight relationships between the works of particular authors: repetitions and remakes, borrowings, quotations, references, polemics. Classical Persian literature is full of wandering verses and wandering themes. And while it is far from ignoring the sense of authorship, its limits of common literary property are much broader than those of modern literature.

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[1] M. Smurzyński, *Perska literatura postmodernistyczna* [in:] *Orientalia Commemorativa*, ed. L. Sudyka, Kraków 2011, p. 245–252.

[2] For a brilliant study of intertextuality in classical Persian poety see: M.L. Reisner, *The Life of the Text and the Fate of Tradition. 1: Naql in Persian Poetics*, "Manuscripta Orientalia" 2003, June, no. 9(2), p. 41–47.

Persian literary modernization movement, most clearly articulated by Nimā Yušij (1895–1960) in poetry and Mohammad Ali Jamālzāde (1892–1997) in prose, encouraged innovation and enhanced the status of the author's creative individuality. The less restrictive poetical form of *še'r-e nou* ("new poetry") on the one hand, and the assimilation of Western literary genres like novel, short story and drama on the other, opened a field for individual expression and literary experiment. This change resulted in an outburst of brilliant literary personalities in Persian 20th century poetry and prose.

Yet, the shift of focus, from collective to individual, from traditional and well-known to new and unexpected, did not change some, very deeply rooted, mechanisms and habits, being the legacy of the centuries-long, Persian literary tradition. The repetitiveness of themes and need for reference to the existing storage of literary motifs and symbols seem to be the features of this phenomenon. It is natural, that national literatures all over the World create their own stylistic canons, symbolical systems and lists of topics to which they constantly refer, but in modern Persian prose the practice seems even more conspicuous. Modern Persian literature can be investigated as a large, dense network of mutually interdependent and interrelated texts that revolve around a cluster of themes, images and symbols, approached again and again from different angles.[3]

Sādeq Hedāyat (1903–1951) was a pioneering author in many fields. His prose works with a large scope of themes, problems and ideas, supplied a fertile soil for the subsequent development of Persian literature. Hedāyat was admired and hated, but it was almost impossible for a 20th century Persian writer not to get inspired by his work or at least, not to take position towards it.

An example which is going to be analyzed, is the case of a theme first approached by Hedāyat in one of his short stories, and then undertaken and developed by two writers of the next generation: Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad (1923–1969) and Simin Dānešvar (1921–2012). The analysis needs to be preceded by a brief summing up of the stories in question.

1. Sādeq Hedāyat, *Zan-i ke mard-aš-rā gom kard* ("The woman who lost her man")[4]

Zarrin Kolāh, a fourteen year old countryside girl, falls in love with Gol Babu, a donkey driver from Māzandarān, who comes to her village during vintage. Zarrin Kolāh is an unloved and neglected child of a poor family, but due to the agency of a friend she succeeds to marry Gol Babu and is taken by him to Tehran. Her living conditions improve in a way, she bears a son, but soon the man appears to be a drug addict and to lash his wife regularly with his ass' whip. Zarrin Kolāh suffers, but also draws pleasure from the beating. One day Gol Babu disappears,

living her alone with her 2-year old son, without any means of survival. In search for her husband, the desperate woman decides to go to Māzandarān, a province on the Caspian shore. She travels with her child, first by bus, then by a lorry, and finally finds her man, living in his native village, with another woman. Gol Babu, supported by his mother, chases Zarrin Kolāh away and denies his fatherhood of the boy. Zarrin Kolāh does not even try to claim her rights. She leaves her child on the doorsteps of a house and goes away. On her way back to Tehran she meets another man, driving an ass and carrying a whip just like Gol Babu.

2. Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad, *Bače-ye mardom* ("Someone else's child")[5]

This is a first-person narrative by a young woman, who purposefully abandons her child in the street. She had been given divorce by her first husband, the father of her 3-year old son. Her second husband is not inclined to keep another man's child, so the woman decides to get rid of it in order to save her marriage. With her son she goes by bus to a distant part of Tehran, orders the child to buy some sweets from a stall on the other side of the street and escapes. She has some remorses for having abandoned her child, her neighbours suggest that she should have left the boy in an orphanage rather than in the street, but her mother approves of her decision. After having got rid of the boy, the woman feels as if she's never had a child. Now she is able to start her new marital life.

3. Simin Dānešvar, *Mard-i ke bar nagašt* ("A man who did not come back")[6]

The heroine of this story, Mohtaram, is a daughter of a poor cobbler. At the age of twelve, she gets married to Ebrāhim, a man who earns his living as a donkey driver. Mohtaram is happy with her new life, she gives birth to two boys. One day Ebrāhim disappears, leaving his wife and his children without money. Mohtaram desperately looks for her husband, travelling by bus all over Tehran with her baby sons, but finds no trace of him. Her savings run off, she has no idea how to survive, for a while she considers leaving her children at the doorsteps of a police station. At this point, the author of the story shifts from her third-person descriptive narrative to a first-person meta-textual monologue, finally deciding to bring Ebrāhim back home. As the reader is told, the man had returned to his native village with another woman, but since she left him after a couple of days, he decided to come back home to his wife. The story ends with a scene of Ebrāhim standing angry in the door with a whip in his hand, and Mohtaram kissing an icon of Imam Ali out of gratitude for her husband's miraculous return.

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[5] J. Āl-e Ahmad, *Setār*, Tehrān 1970, p. 17–26.
[6] S. Dānešvar, *Šahr-i čun behešt*, Tehrān 1975, p. 135–146.

Commentary

Hušang Golširi in his study devoted to Simin Dānešvar's writing[7], notices analogies between her and Hedāyat's, stories. In his comparative analyzis he speaks in favour of Hedāyat, praising the brilliant construction (*me'māri-ye deraxšān*)[8] of his narrative, of which Dānešvar's text is deprived, and criticizing – as a failed idea – the second part of her text, in which the author in person intervenes in the course of events, in order to procure a happy ending. Golširi does not mention the relationship between the texts of Dānešvar and Āl-e Ahmad, neither does he perceive the polemical character of Dānešvar's work.

In fact, while no direct relationship between the stories by Hedāyat and Āl-e Ahmad can be noticed, Dānešvar in her work refers to both of them, thus establishing a connection between her both predecessors, through their common topic of an abandoned child, which is of secondary importance in Hedāyat's, but central in Āl-e Ahmad's short story.

Dānešvar's inspiration by Hedāyat's story rises no doubts. Not only are there similarities between the couples Zarrin Kolāh – Gol Babu, and Mohtaram – Ebrāhim very clear; also the construction of both stories is (in spite of Golširi's reservation), to some extent, parallel. In both cases the focus of the narrative is on the woman, not her man; her social and family background, and the events leading to her marriage are in a more or less detailed way described in retrospective, the all-knowing narrator telling the reader her thoughts and feelings. The woman comes from the poor, underprivileged, social class, she is simple and uneducated (*zan-e jamā'at*), married very young; she gets no support from her family. In both cases the event crucial for the development of the plot is an unexpected disappearance of the man, leading to the woman's lamentable situation, forcing her to make decisions about herself and her child/children, for which she is not prepared. Some secondary details corroborate the interdependence between the texts: the job of the man and the symbolical whip in his hand, the location of the story in the traditional, old quarters of Tehran, the motif of travelling by bus. The title of Dānešvar's story itself alludes to that by Hedāyat.

The relationship between the texts by Dānešvar and Āl-e Ahmad (her husband, by the way) is, at the first glance, less obvious. In *Bače-ye mardom* we learn little about the woman, who even remains anonymous, still less about her husband/husbands – the narrative concentrates on the process of the mother getting rid of her child. But the atmosphere and the setting of the story are familiar – the protagonist comes from a similar social background, she is a simple, illiterate woman (*zan-e čašm-o guš baste*), the action of the story takes place in the same traditional neighbourhoods of Tehran, the motif of traveling by bus with a child plays a role in it. Moreover, Dānešvar gives some hints directly referring the reader to Āl-e Ahmad's text, e.g. the motif of buying sweets to the child in a street stall, using the same characteristic idioms as Āl-e Ahmad does, e.g. *sar be nist kardan* ("to anni-

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[7] H. Golširi, *Jedāl-e naqš bā naqqāš dar āsār-e Simin Dānešvar*, Tehrān 1997, p. 70–72.

[8] Golširi, op. cit., p. 70.

hilate", "to get rid of ")[9] the child; *zāq-e siyāh-e kasi-rā čub zadan* ("to observe or spy on somebody")[10], etc.

Also Dānesvar's attitude towards the child is closer to that of Āl-e Ahmad, than to Hedāyat's. In Hedāyat's story the little boy (Mānde Ali) is merely a passive object of Zarrin Kolāh's activities, more like a puppet – due to being given opium he is an anemic and apathetic baby, we never hear him speak, he shows no reaction to what is going on. Quite differently the little (anonymous) boy in Āl-e Ahmad's story – is an active participant of the events, he talks to his mother, he asks clever questions, and finally agrees to go alone across the street to buy sweets, thus sealing his fate. Āl-e Ahmad is trying to render the phonetic and grammatical pecularities of a child's speech in his dialogues, and so does Dānešvar: her little boys (Ahmadi and Mamadi) are less talkative than Āl-e Ahmad's boy, but they also speak and move, they are live children, not merely requisites.

So far the references to the works of both authors are being made by Dānešvar in a non-direct way. The second part of her short story[11], criticized by Golširi as blurring its structure is, however, the most interesting in this respect. Having brought her narrative to the point, where Mohtaram has exhausted all the ways of finding her husband and is standing with her sons in front of a bakery without a penny, Dānešvar decides to interrupt her story and to show herself from behind the mask of an all-knowing narrator, as the author of her fiction. In this capacity she reveals the machinery of her story-making and engages in a fictional dialogue – apparently with her readers, but in reality with the authors of the two previous short stories, more importantly Āl-e Ahmad.

While writing her version of the story, Simin Dānešvar adopts a feminist viewpoint and defends it from her imagined opponents. As a result, she does not allow Mohtaram to do with her children, what Hedāyat's and Āl-e Ahmad's heroines have done. In her authorial commentary she takes in consideration different possible conclusions of the story, such as: Mohtaram finding herself a job (e.g. as a maid) or becoming a prostitute, in order to earn her and her children's living; Mohtaram abandoning her children in the street, at a police station or at an orphanage; comitting a suicide, asking her stepmother for help, etc. Then, Dānešvar rejects all these possibile solutions one after another for different reasons. As for the idea of leaving the children at somebody's doorsteps, Dānešvar concludes: *...in Mohtaram-i ke man mišenāsam nemi tavānad az bačehā-yaš del bekanad* ("This Mohtaram whom I know would not renounce her children").[12] Differently from her two male predecessors, Dānešvar represents her heroine as a sensitive person, deeply attached to her children and responsible for them, in spite of her critical situation. Moreover, Dānešvar perceives the problem in its social, not merely individial, dimension, even if she is unable to propose a better solution to it than bringing back the man to take care of his family.

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⁹ Āl-e Ahmad, op. cit., p.17; Dānešvar, op. cit., p. 144.
¹⁰ Āl-e Ahmad, op. cit. p. 24; Dānešvar, op. cit., p. 144.
¹¹ Dānešvar, op. cit., 143–145.
¹² Ibid., p. 144.

The above three short stories should be read jointly. On their example we can observe the continuation and evolution of a theme in modern Persian prose, the changing observation point of the narrator, and the way in which the links between the texts are being built. Dānešvar's text, being chronologically the last of the three, plays the role of a keystone bringing together the stories by Hedāyat and Āl-e Ahmad, revealing their mutual relationship and being a polemical response to both.

The intertextual relations between the three stories under consideration have been rather simple and easy to describe, but if we take in account the number of repetitive themes and images in modern Persian writings and all the intended and not intended connections between the texts, we obtain the picture of modern Persian literature as an intricate, multi-leveled and -dimensional structure, still to be explored.

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