Death and Women in Sadegh Hedayat’s “The Blind Owl”

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INTRODUCTION

Sadegh Hedayat's 'The Blind Owl' is one of the most important literary works in Persian language. The original Persian text of The Blind Owl, marked "not for sale in Iran," appeared as a mimeographed publication in India in 1937. It was assumed at the time that Hedayat feared the repressive rule of Reza Shah; he feared especially that with the publication of this work he might have violated the established norms. He was aware that the propagation of a message that focused on the strangulation of the Iranian people, on the denial of individual human rights, and on the need for individual enlightenment would not remain undetected for ever.

The central theme of the story is an attempt toward the resolution of the writer's dualistic experiences of the real versus unreal, the sensual against the spiritual and death as opposed to life. Underlying his problems are sexual fear, association of women with death (a common theme in literature) and disgust affiliated with death and women. Perhaps no other modern Iranian writer has been claimed by his countrymen more than Sadegh Hedayat has. A tale of one man’s isolation, the novel contains a maze of symbols, recurring images, social commentary, allusions to opium-induced states, contemplations of the human condition, interjections on art, and references to literary and religious texts—all of which have, for decades, made it fertile ground for critical interpretation. The most long-standing theory was espoused by the Iranian Communist Party (Tudeh), with which Hedayat for a time sympathized. The Tudeh’s claim was that the black mood in the book is an allusion to life under Reza Shah, who ruled Iran from 1925 until 1941. But as scholar Homa Katouzian points out in Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer,
while Hedayat did oppose the shah’s tyrannical reign, the book is a far more universal statement about alienation. Often compared to the work of Franz Kafka (whom Hedayat admired), The Blind Owl also brings to mind Fernando Pessoa’s The Book of Disquiet in its stark meditation on dejection. “There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker,” begins the book, and in the pages that ensue we glimpse this solitude, through the narrator’s room, which “stands upon the ruins of thousands of ancient houses… like a tomb”; through the landscape of “crouching, accursed trees,” between which there are “ash-grey houses” where “no living creature could ever have dwelt”; and through the narrator’s estrangement from the “rabble-men” who bear “an expression of greed on their faces, in pursuit of money and sexual satisfaction.

An ethereal girl appearing throughout offers hope. She is the image the narrator paints on his pen cases, a vision he falls in love with, and the portrait on an ancient jar, inside “an almond-shaped panel” (perhaps a reference to a mandorla, an almond-shaped contour found around images of Mary—the almond representing virgin birth). But the girl has a “double nature,” resurfacing as the narrator’s cunning mother, and, later, as his promiscuous wife.

**SYMBOLISM OF DEATH AND WOMEN IN SADEGH HEDAYAT’S THE BLIND OWL**

The word manic is important in connection to the story. The narrator wants the ethereal woman to remain in the world of death. Furthermore, she must remain out of touch and not to be seen by others. Later on, when the ethereal woman and the mother image become the same, one realizes why the narrator is so pre-occupied with woman as a focus of the problem of life and death. Mother is the birth giver. The narrator is mystified by the strange psychic state of his mother. The mother withdraws and there is an intense need to find her. The ethereal woman becomes the mother. How could anyone bear a sex encounter with her, to enter her body? Therefore any suggestion of love intimacy with women in the sexual sense must be avoided. For him it is not possible. At this point, sexual love becomes the focus of the collapse of security and of being.

A tendency for suicide arises when he believes that a world in which it is not possible to distinguish the reality from the painted appearance is exists. This weariness with life is a symbol
of schizoid suicide, which leads into withdrawal into death, into a ghostly world. In the unconscious, the narrator believes that the corruption of relationships through sexual contact brings nothingness. This again indicates the presence of a schizoid element in his mind. A person with a schizoid mind seeks isolation. Union with a woman will not take him into the path of separateness, so he buries the woman. Now he can be free. He is alone but alive. In the process, he is denouncing the "inferior" half of himself, the woman in him, the part that he fears may corrupt and make him diseased. He expresses the intolerable perplexity of woman as a focus of appearance and reality.

But this distrust of women is not misogyny. It is a result of profound pondering of problems of human nature and being. Hedayat's association of women with death, his inability to deal with realism through the horror of the tragic, and a paranoid attitude accompanying his inability to tolerate and accept his own mortal reality indicates a form of dissociation from reality which serves as a clue to his existence problem. In "the Blind Owl", the writer fails to establish existential authenticity and freedom. This is because in his struggle through re-birth, his view of self, others and the world in general is dominated by his rejection of his female elements of being and knowing. Such rejection is mainly due to his schizoid problems, but it is also magnified by the prevailing attitudes toward women in his native country.

**CONCLUSION**

To take you inside such a mind in such a brief book is an achievement up there with Poe and Kafka- to perceive the hell of isolation within one's own head is to show how the narrator's madness is an endlessly coherent vision of the world. It corresponds to the way that he sees the world- and that vision is not inconsistent or inadequate in its own terms. He functions as a system of epistemology, processing new information, but never progressing and never learning. A feminist critique might stop there- but I don't think we should- I think there is more to say here about the way he thinks of women and the way that relates to the way he thinks about truth. The male intellectuals of the period and long after accepting principles of equality and freedom for both the sexes and at the same time growing up with the traditional notions of good, non sexual, virginal woman no doubt would have had problems coping with the new image. They did not
know whether to be on their knees to her in reverence to her as the good mother figure, or full of sensual contempt for her as the whore. Ultimately, these men would be in need of her presence or impelled to destroy her. Hedayat would have been no exception. His preference for the spiritual, non-sexual contact with women can also be attributed to his inability to cope with the emergence of the new woman. The female characters therefore may be seen as dramatizations of endopsychic situations, to be understood as attempts to express the writer’s attitudes to women and to his own female element, and to embody these attitudes to the female knowledge in order to deal with problems of identity and being. In turn, his cultural experiences and the masculinity of the society in which he lives also influence such dramatizations. In a masculine society, such as Iran, a great deal of the contemporary culture needs to be explained in terms of the development of modes of false strength, which are based on a certain male dynamic. Where there is a deep insecurity of existence, this male dynamic is employed as a substitute for the female element of "being". In these societies reality is normally located in the masculine paradigm, in which all female elements of being and knowing have been eradicated. In these situations, men will have problems accepting their culturally unacceptable and inferior female element. It should also be noted that men of Hedayats' era, for the first time in the Iranian history, witnessed the transformation of the traditional Iranian women into modern twentieth century women—the kind who joined the ranks of the political parties, rallied, had lovers; had abortions and even bore illegitimate children. They also challenged the bipolar image of women as the virtuous versus women as prostitutes.
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