



The Allegory of Cultural Imperialism in *The Blind Owl*

Mahdiye Abasy

Islamic Azad University

Abstract

The Blind Owl is Sadegh Hedayat's magnum opus and a major literary work of 20th-century Iran. Fredric Jameson, an American literary critic, published an essay titled "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." His argument suggests that third-world literatures are necessarily national allegories, reflecting the political and social realities of those nations. Jameson believes Western powers occupy parts of the country teaching youths in these regions to reject their own cultures in favor of Europe's. This study examines the Western cultural invasion and the identity crisis in *The Blind Owl* and discusses the literature of the third world in the capitalist era. This study intends to state that Hedayat's novel is an allegory of cultural reform that has been reconstructed in a modernist framework.

Keywords: The Blind Owl, Sadegh Hedayat, Fredric Jameson, Capitalism, Cultural Imperialism, Allegory



Introduction

Sadegh Hedayat (1903 -1951) was an Iranian writer and translator. Best known for his novel *The Blind Owl*, he was one of the earliest Iranian writers to adopt literary modernism in their career. Hedayat composed *The Blind Owl*, also known as *Bufe-Kur*, while residing in Bombay in 1937. It chronicles the life of an opium addict who leads an ambiguous and mysterious existence. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* is one of the most remarkable pieces of Modern Persian literature, with traces of Poe and Kafka. It also tackles issues that are fundamental to any person's awareness of the world beyond themselves. However, the work is challenging to read because of its immense symbolism and imagery.

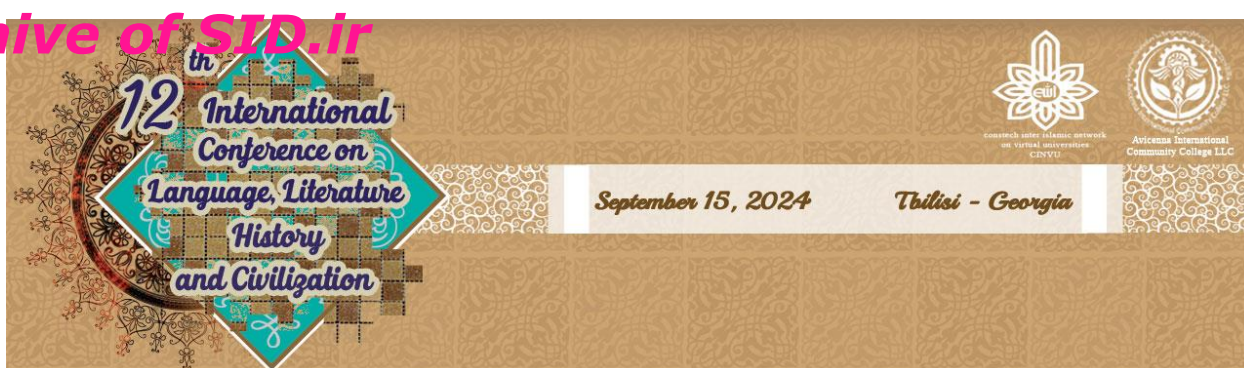
Fredric Jameson (1934-) is generally considered to be one of the foremost contemporary Marxist literary critics writing in English. He has published a wide range of works analyzing literary and cultural texts and developing his own neo-Marxist theoretical position. In addition, Jameson has produced a large number of texts criticizing opposing theoretical positions. A prolific writer, he has assimilated an astonishing number of theoretical discourses into his project and has intervened in many contemporary debates while analyzing a diversity of cultural texts, ranging from the novel to video, from architecture to postmodernism.

The Statement of the Problem

Whereas colonialism may be over as a political order after the post-1945 decolonity is still active as the most widespread order method of domination across our world. It is a colonization of the imaginary of the colonized from within. Such colonization was achieved mainly through the representation of modes of knowledge and meaning by imposing the colonizer's patterns of expression and beliefs. In the light of Jameson's article titled "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", the researcher examines Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* to show how Western canons are considered the ultimate destiny for third-world authors. The control of knowledge is the goal of colonizers through native language. The prominent works such as *The Blind Owl* were influenced by intellectuals of the West, and perhaps it can be said that this is the reason for its popularity in other Western countries. Meanwhile, many third-world literary writings written with the beliefs and traditions of the native people have not been translated into other languages and remain undiscovered.

Methodology

This research uses cultural analysis as a metaphorical representation of Iran in *The Blind Owl* (1937). In "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," Marxist literary scholar Fredric Jameson presents a theory of the then-current state of world literature. The theory goes something like this: practitioners of Western literature, highly familiar with their own canon and encouraged to comment upon it by others sharing that familiarity, live in something of an insular literary universe, and for the most part fail to recognize the nature of literature produced outside that canon, or that is only tangentially referential to it. This other literature Jameson calls "third-world" – he even apologizes for using the term (67) – and suggests that Western readers interpret it along the lines of a national allegory: the hero represents his or her nation, and his or her situation is that of a colonized or formerly colonized nation within a colonizing, globalizing world. This theory has proved powerful and controversial. It attempts at once to attribute agency to readers and writers of the colonized world and to tie the myriad products of their efforts to the yoke of a single interpretive frame. This frame has its own problems, but Jameson's reasoning is inadequate in a way more fundamental than his proposed method of interpretation. The "third world" naturally puts out a lot of literature, being much larger in population than the European



world and its white settler colonies combined, and Jameson's analysis only applies to a specific subset of its literature, that subset being works by authors keenly interested in the Western canon, who consciously sought to construct works of fiction that would interact with that canon as national allegories.

Discussion

Hedayat's elaborate history casts doubt on the concept of national literature by reconsidering and modifying our customs to the point where we are forced to view them "through its eyes" and perceive them in a different light. He prioritized Westernization over understanding Iran's rich Islamic and traditional heritage. Rather than reconciling it with customary beliefs, he favored fully enforcing Western modernity on the populace, which had detrimental effects on the nation's politics, economy, and moral and spiritual standards [1].

The narrator of the novel, a painter of pen cases, longs to discover his identity, his origins, and the meaning of his life in the first section. According to him, "Ever since I broke the last ties which hold me to the rest of mankind my one desire has been to attain a better knowledge of myself" [2]. The narrator's current identity issue is indicated by the queries, "Who am I? Who are we?" [2]. These concerns arise, as is well known, when colonial powers destroy indigenous culture. Despite the fact that Iran has never been a part of a Western Empire. Rather, imperialism has been its victim. Additionally, we are also fully aware of how the West, through so-called modernism, influenced the indigenous civilizations [1].

The protagonist of the novel paints a portrait of an anonymous, ethereal female who enters his life like a falling star in the second section. As he states "In this mean world of wretchedness and misery I thought that for a ray of sunlight had broken upon my life. Alas, it was not sunlight, but a passing gleam, a falling star, which flashed upon me, in the form of a woman – or of an angel" [2]

Hedayat is attempting to instill the idea that it is not necessary to break with the past or traditional values as they have been perceived by the Western enlightenment, with references to the shrine of Abdol-Azim and the discovery of the ancient clay pot with the same portrait on it as sketched by the painter who is a flag bearer of modernity. One interpretation of the clay pot and his wife's character is a struggle between Modernism and Civilization. The point is reinforced by a passage in the second section where the protagonist accidentally smashes the pot while "achieving" his wife's body [1].

With *The Blind Owl*, Hidayat made an Iranian claim on modernism and avant-garde aesthetics, which was novel for Europe at a time when Iranian literature was assimilating modern genre forms like the short story and the novel (which had gained ground in western European literatures during the nineteenth century [3].

In addition to being a work of fiction, *The Blind Owl* is also an allegory of cultural reform, arguing that the Persian cultural heritage has persisted from pre-Islamic times to the present. It also shows how this legacy can be incorporated into modern Iranian culture by "recasting" iconic elements from the past within a modernist framework. Stated differently, it is an investigation of intertextuality—the conscious citation of elements of the Persian cultural heritage, as opposed to their imitation [3].

The well-known book by Hidayat features a bipartite structure in which the tale of a doomed love is told twice, in two distinct locations. The first part tells the tale of a solitary painter who falls in love with the mysterious "ethereal girl" (dukhtar-i asiri). Part II is a sick young man's "hysterical self-analysis" (Kamshad's term) in which he writes about his unfulfilled longing for his unfaithful wife. The two storytellers are alone: The painter resides outside of the municipal limits in seclusion



amid ruins. The author lives in a busy metropolis, but he is completely cut off from "the rabble" (rajaliha) in the area [3].

The various historical invasions caused identity crises that resulted in people with unstable identities and nameless people, such as the story's narrator, who has imposed a double standard of suppression on the female character by silencing her voice and taking it. In this sense, the historical woman of the present is condemned to mistreatment by two parties: the male-dominated patriarchal society within the country, and the outside invaders, the Arabs and Mongols [4]. The narrator of the story wishes to define himself for his own shadow from the beginning, not because he is at peace with his own soul, but rather because he lives in a historical setting that is constantly being invaded and colonized by outsiders. For this reason, he adds, "I am in dire need to relate myself to a fairy being, to my own shadow – the ominous shadow bending at the wall before a tallow-burner and it seems as if it reads carefully and swallows what I am writing. This shadow may certainly understand better than I... Only this shadow can know me; certainly it understands" [2].

According to Ajoudani, the narrative of Iran during the Islamic era in the second part of *The Blind Owl* is highly praised. We can therefore deduce that the man whose mouth produces Arabic lines from the Quran is a symbolic embodiment of the Arabs who subdued and captured the Great Iran. The Mongols, who are symbolically objectified as a butcher in need of blood and greatly comforted by the sight of blood, are the other force that destroys Iranian confidence and glory. They are that bloodthirsty Mongol who, despite his own traditions, customs, and culture, refrains from sleeping with married women; instead, he kills their husband and rapes them [1].

Naturally, the existence of the family's sons—as long as they are elevated to the status of fathers—is essential to the continuation of a family name. To put it another way, a man can pass down his name to the next generation by becoming a father. The story's male speaker, who goes by "narrator," is referred to as such throughout and is not given a given name. As mentioned, having a certain parent determines if a name is legitimate [1].

The narrator's lack of faith in the people he encounters and the things that are either happening to him or that he has been told is one of his defining traits. Giddens [5] asserts that the question of trust is central to the formation of a person's social existence and plays a critical role in realizing the significance of other people for one's sense of self. According to him, "trust established in early life is an essential basis for ontological security," and the development of a sense of trust is a necessary component of early life experiences [5].

According to Giddens, "a stable external world and a coherent sense of self-identity are at the origin of trust in other people" (65). The narrator has a great deal of mistrust and suspicion for the persons and events going on in his immediate surroundings. Says the narrator:

"I do not yet know. I do not know where I am at this moment, whether the patch of sky above my head and these few spans of ground on which I am sitting belong to Nishapur or to Balkh or to Benares" [2].

Because of this ambiguity, he hasn't been able to develop a defense mechanism against existential fears that can endanger his life, which has kept him from developing healthy relationships with those in his immediate vicinity, including his wife. In part of the story, he states that this ambiguity makes him so distrustful of everything that it exacerbates his mental instability.

"I have seen so many contradictory things and have heard so many words of different sorts, my eyes have seen so much of the wornout surface of various objects – the thin, tough rind behind which the spirit is hidden – that now I believe nothing. At this very moment I doubt the existence of tangible, solid things, I doubt clear, manifest truths" [1].



Since a person's name and family name define their identity and function as a kind of nominal identity, there is a clear correlation between an individual's social and identity values and these factors.

In a society where men predominate, like Iran, a lot of modern culture must be understood in terms of the emergence of false strength modalities that are predicated on certain male dynamics. This male dynamic is used to take the place of the feminine aspect of "being" in situations where there is a deep sense of uncertainty about existence. These societies typically view reality in terms of the masculine paradigm, which has removed all aspects of femininity from knowing and being. Men in these circumstances will find it difficult to accept the inferior and socially unacceptable female part of them [6].

It's also important to remember that, for the first time in Iranian history, the men of Hedayat's day saw the traditional Iranian women change into the contemporary women of the twentieth century. The same people who gathered support, took up political causes, made love, aborted babies, and even joined political parties. They also contested the dichotomous perception of women as prostitutes or pious. The conventional ideas of a decent, nonsexual, virgin lady would have undoubtedly been difficult for the male intellectuals of the day and long after to adjust to, as they accepted the principles of equality and freedom for both sexes while growing up [7].

Hedayat's incapacity to deal with the appearance of the new woman may possibly be the reason for his choice for the spiritual, non-sexual relationship with women. In order to address issues of identity and being, the female characters might thus be interpreted as dramatizations of end psychic circumstances, expressing the writer's attitudes toward women and his own feminine element and serving as an embodiment of these attitudes toward female knowledge. Thus, these dramatizations are also influenced by his cultural experiences and the masculinity of the society he lives in.

According to Jameson [8], Western powers still occupied parts of the country teaching youths in these regions to reject their own cultures in favor of Europe's. These teachings played a large role, in fact, in the educations of such authors as Lu Xun or Hedayat— individuals who consciously molded themselves into European-style intellectuals. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," then, represents significant progress past this highly one-sided power dynamic, but has not fully attained genuine representation of the colonial other.

Conclusion

This study discusses the Western cultural invasion and the identity crisis in *The Blind Owl* and states the literature of the third world in the capitalist era. In the light of Jameson's article titled "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", the researcher examines Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* to explain how Western canons consider a perfect model for third-world authors and the non-western are controlled by their native language.



References

- [1] Ajoudani, M. (2006). Hedayat, Blind Owl, and Nationalism. *London: Fasl-e Ketab Publications.*
- [2] Hedayat, S. (1957). *The Blind Owl*. Translated by D. P. Costello. *New York Grove Press.*
- [3] Khanalari, P. N. (2002). Khaterat-e Adabi Dar Barehei-e Sadegh Hedayat. *Yad-e Sadegh Hedayat.*
- [4] Basiratmanesh, H. (1995). Culture and Advertising in the State of Iran.
- [5] Giddens, A. (2023). Modernity and self-identity. In *Social Theory Re-Wired* (pp. 477-484). Routledge.
- [6] Nafisi, A. (2002). Moazal-e Buf-e Kur (the Problem of Blind Owl). In *Yad-e Sadegh Hedayat*, edited by A. Dehbashi. *Tehran: Sales Publications.*
- [7] Southgate, M. S. (1977). Hedayat's 'The Blind Owl' Forty Years After. Compiled and edited by Michael C. Hillmann Austin: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1978. 215pp. *Iranian Studies*, 10(4), 314-322.
- [8] Jameson, F. (1986). Third-world literature in the era of multinational capitalism. *Social text*, (15), 65-88.