

## Nostalgia and Degeneration of Splendour in Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*

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### ABSTRACT

*The Arab invasion of Sassanid's territory in 637 A.D. was the cause for many conspicuous changes in the social and political aspects of Persians' life. One of the most distinct changes was the gradual degeneration of Persians' assumed cultural and religious legacy that considered Zoroastrianism as the true religion and the Aryan race as a pure and superior one. However, centuries of struggle and skirmishes in part of those interested in the revival of their assumed ancient past did not lead to the restoration of the type of social esteem and stability they favoured for their country. In his modernist novel, *The Blind Owl*, Sadeq Hedayat sounds like the spokesperson of this faction, voicing their lamentation upon the identity loss and the degeneration of the glorious past they nostalgically advocated and dreamed. Accordingly, building upon Dennis Walder's theory of Postcolonial Nostalgias, the authors argue that Hedayat's novella offers a couple of tales as platforms to nostalgically lament the aforementioned undesirable changes that these individuals had to encounter and endure. As such, the first tale presents the bitter reality of a world where nostalgia is prevailing and affecting the invaded nation, while the second tale pictures the degenerated splendour and the tarnished image of the past immediately after the arrival of the invaders.*

*Keywords: The Blind Owl; Hedayat; nostalgia; culture; identity*

### INTRODUCTION

Crafted in two separate but interdependent sections, *The Blind Owl* tells the story of an alienated individual living a life deep down the canyons of nostalgia and irremediable paranoia. His insatiable desire for finding the ethereal girl, who flashes upon him in his current life reflecting a spitting image of his remote ancestors, pushes him on a nostalgic quest that resembles much like a fantasy. However, through the abrupt and paranormal change of the tale, the nameless protagonist falls in deep delirium and, through a startling dream, finds him in the past when he was married to the very same girl who is now, unlike her innocent character in the first narration, portrayed as a repulsive and morally degenerated individual.

The opacity and confusing nonlinearity of the events taking place in both sections of the story, has made it the subject of innumerable critical controversies that chiefly arise from the story's possible undertones. Many critics have focused on the notorious ambiguity, sensuality, and downright despondency in a tale truly composed of a myriad of puzzling symbols and compelling imageries. Many have been stricken with its prevalent despair-inducing indications that place the reader in a hallucinatory dungeon marked by "silence, haze, and existential shattering and featured as the end of time, end of space, and the end of psyche" (Mohaghegh 2010, p.144). Another critic, emphasizing the crisis of identity in a tale comprised of a circle of unnamed characters, states that: "Observably, in this peculiar process of identification/obscuration all the characters (demonized or idealised, feminine or

masculine, old or young) share common features, and ultimately emerge as identical versions of a single self” (Yavari 2008, p.51). In a Post-Colonial commentary, Yasamine Coulter sees the key to the novella’s meaning in the writer’s “personal angst, stemming from his inability to reconcile Western and Eastern influences and modes of existence and culture”, thus creating a protagonist “disillusioned with his country’s traditional way of life and an outsider within his own society” (2000, p.1).

Many find themselves entangled by the novella’s both nuanced and evident points of existentialism and pessimism so far as to compare it with Camus’s *The Stranger* or even Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. To these critics, the novella offers an identical character that does not focus on why he is going through with this cycle of life but rather focuses on “how to escape from the constant rebirth. He believes his existence is pointless and absurd. He sees his place in this cycle is almost nothingness because of how he does not worry about his situation in an absurd manner” (Kmichaelis 2013, p.1). In another review, Mansouri-Zeyni reads the tale from a new perspective: “Identical characters obscure the work; the resemblance amongst them seemingly originates in some mysterious old man” (2013, p.553). He goes on to “demonstrate how every male character resembles this old man. Thereafter, he is argued to be non-existent; all the characters, therefore, become Baudrillardian simulacra bound together through family resemblances” (2013, p.553).

Despite various in-depth commentaries, *The Blind Owl* still maps unexplored territories. Its subtle allusions to old Persia, Aryan people, and Zoroastrianism as pedestals of the Persians’ honourable but degenerated distant past makes *The Blind Owl* a wistful patriot voice after the desire to revive those apparently lost values. With the overthrow of Sassanid Empire –a highly prestigious ruling power of the time Persia’s social and political dominance came to experience a lot of sweeping changes. As a result, the emergence of the new religion and the rise of a new government caused the gradual degeneration of the Persians’ rich cultural legacy, and marginalisation of Zoroastrianism that was the dominant religion among Aryans in Persia.

Centuries after these overwhelming changes that were accompanied by incessant instability, degeneracy and ferment, many artists created works in which they lamented the changes they considered undesirable and degenerating. Accordingly, this paper argues that such thematic undercurrent runs throughout *The Blind Owl* picturing the contrast by which the author puts his desirable glorious pre-Islamic era in contrast to the Islamic era he knows responsible for the demise of that glory and its following degeneration. To highlight and demonstrate such thematic undercurrent, this paper begins with a clear description of symbols embedded in the first tale that points to the present time with a nostalgia-stricken mood, and ends with a commentary on the allusive elements that provide a tarnished picture of the nation’s legacies of the distant past after the arrival of Arabs.

In sketching out Hedayat’s nostalgic feelings of the past, we employ and take into account Dennis Walder’s theory of *Postcolonial Nostalgias* articulated in his book *Postcolonial Nostalgias: Writing, Representation, and Memory* (2011). In his book, he clarifies that postcolonial nostalgia is not “simply to recall the past, and turn it into a personal narrative of anger or guilt: It involves coming to terms with the past in an ethical as well as heuristic sense” (p. 14). More importantly, he asserts this type of recollection “is to connect what you remember with the memories of others, colonisers and colonised and in-between. It is ‘from’ the self, meaning with others in mind, rather than writing ‘about’ the self (p.14). This particularly terse outline fittingly parallels what the readers generally go through in reading *The Blind Owl*; hearing voices of coloniser, colonised, and in-betweens; yet from a single self or perspective that is of the narrator, helplessly bringing into light features of a nation from different epochs and thus regretting a loss.

Interestingly, this is where the term postcolonial can still provide a useful conceptual paradigm, if handled with prudence and critical sensitivity. This theory is not to offer a mere postcolonial approach as the ordinary struggles within a nation to redeem its own ethnicity and nationality in opposition to a dominant power, but it aims to picture its nostalgic aftermaths on “fragmented, multi-perspectival” (Walder 2011, p.14) minds that tend to bring into literature their helpless nostalgic feelings. This is what defines the narrative process of *The Blind Owl* as a postcolonial nostalgia-stricken literary piece. As Walder states, “I want to suggest that nostalgia has not just a continuing interest but a special resonance for those of us entangled by the long histories of colonialism and decolonisation” (p.12). In fact, what can be understood as supposed intentions of the author is what Walder calls a “broken mirror” (p. 14) in which the narrator unsuccessfully and hopelessly tries to fix. His nostalgia is stimulated by a downright restless quest for a national identity through which “looking back [is] a source of pleasure in tough times” (p. 5) of post-war era of seventh century in which no institution of thought and mind seemed native and stable.

### NOSTALGIC QUEST FOR A LOST MAJESTY

The narrator of the first section presents himself as the painter of pen-case covers, who dwells in the outskirts of the city of Ray, Tehran, far away from the concerns of the everyday life. The place is completely isolated, but is surrounded by ruins –so old and dusty that one can find them “depicted only on the covers of ancient pen-cases” (Hedayat 1957, p.4). Declaring, “There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker,” (Hedayat 1957, p.6) the author sets the mind of the reader ablaze with sheer agony. However, the canker that slowly erodes his whole being is the picture he keeps drawing on pen-cases. This picture symbolises his routine preoccupation that takes (and has taken) him to an undefined point of nostalgia. Remaining customarily identical, the subject of his paintings displays a cypress tree at the foot of which squats a bent old man gazing at a girl in long black dress, who holds out a morning glory while a stream keeps them apart.

He walks into the world of nostalgia upon witnessing the prototype of his paintings in a real life experience that is stunning yet assuring. He realises that it is no coincidence, and that “in some previous existence in a world of dreams [his] soul had lived side by side with hers” (Hedayat 1957, p.14). Since he is quite touched by the close connection he felt for her he cannot stop looking for her; yet, to his dismay, after two months and four days of circling around the house he finds no traces of her. However, the strong impression she made upon him makes him remember those “frightening, magic eyes, which seemed to express a bitter reproach to mankind, with their look of anxiety and wonder, of menace and promise” (p.7), a look that sinks him into a deep daze.

It is through this rich imagery that Hedayat manages to simultaneously release the anguish of that canker and hide it behind multiple layers of the text. He portrays a girl with the most Elysian features to refer to an entity that seems to be no less than a divine quality for him. Failing to find the girl after two months and four days of hunting for her, the narrator turns disheartened to the point that he feels his “existence had become pointless, and that [he] had lost [his] way for all time to come” (Hedayat 1957, p.10). As M.I. Ghotbi puts it in his *this is the Blind Owl (1934)*, the narrator “repeats the numbers two and four in an effort to convey that civilization arose about two-thousand and four-hundred years ago” (quoted in Coulter 2000, p.5). This assertion helps us date back to a time when Persia had its one of prestigious ruling powers reining the nation; when Zoroastrianism gained momentum and met its peak of superiority and stature.

In fact, a spate of piercing imageries at the very beginning of the story offers ingenious descriptions of a character with idealised and noble quality, which leaves the reader

dispirited upon her absence from the plot pervading a deep-seated feeling of nostalgia. The absence of this glory, in reality, is the embodiment of “Iranian cultural identity” personified as “fleeting, illusive, and impalpable” (Simidchieva 2008, p.25). Put simply, the Iran of 1900s, that witnessed the despotism of Pahlavi dynasty as another tyrannical government, provoked and inflamed many people to criticize their consciousness and attempt to gain their freedom of speech, religious identity, and cultural legacy back to themselves. At the forefront of these nationalists who had the nostalgia for a pre-Islamic Iran were modernist writers who published their literary works criticizing the government while at the same time searching for their true identity in a distant past. “Nostalgia pervaded the period’s literature, both poetry and prose,” (Yavari 2008, p.46) bringing into view and paying homage to the glorious pictures of the pre-Islamic era as their true origin and centre of honour.

Surely enough, it does not come as a surprise when the narrator gets to see the girl in that strange view on the thirteenth day of Nouruz (the New Year) which was one of the highly reputed traditions of old Persians (Aryans) that is still celebrated by Iranians after centuries. Hence, both the maudlin narrator and the nostalgia-stricken writer come to regret the loss of the whole majesty (identity) by picturing them in distinct ways: one by writing and the other by picturing it on pen-cases as his career.

The initial twist of the tale, rendering the first flickering flash of the past, comes along when the hopeless narrator returns home after a futile search for the girl and observes “a female form clad in black sitting on the stone bench outside the door” (Hedayat 1957,12). Wondrous is the unique connection made between this rather unearthly being who picks out a “home” situated amidst the ruins of the city of Ray and the narrator who seems caught up with the girl’s black eyes finding “the everlasting night of impenetrable darkness for which [he] had been seeking” long (p.13). She chooses that certain home, which is located among the ruins of Ray and represents the pictures of the past, for she embodies the Aryan people that once resided in that place. Precisely put, she finds her way to the narrator’s home for she is, symbolically, a traveller of distant past and tries to find her way to somewhere that she truly belongs to –a place that is nowhere except the narrator’s dwelling place located amidst the ruins of Ray. The ethereal girl can be taken to act as the long-lost glory of Aryan people having been defiled through centuries and awakening a fleeting recollection of the past in the nostalgia-stricken life of the narrator in the present.

Even the realised fantasy of her heartening presence in the narrator’s life is fleeting and comes to an end shortly after he meets her bringing him more despair and nostalgia. Upon finding her dead he follows his instincts to sketch out her eyes in a nostalgic effort to hold on to her beauty before she ends up thoroughly decomposed and distorted. This very impulsive act of capturing her beauty helps him work out the mysterious secrets of all the ancient paintings for “the subject [he] had chosen, a dead woman, had a curious affinity to [his] dead manner of painting, since [he] had never been anything else than a painter of dead bodies” (Hedayat 1957, p.18). By drawing her beauty that is the only thing left he can hold on to, he instinctively ventures to hang on to the nostalgias of a glorious past. Yet, her death symbolises the fall of Persian splendour as well since “she represents tradition, in that she is the incarnation of divinity which the Sufis claimed to have encountered” (Coulter 2000, p.5).

By exhibiting a protagonist immensely fanatical about preserving his values, Hedayat, as a Persian nationalist, keeps sheltering the rare flashes of the meritorious past even in the ignominious present. This comes into view when the narrator sets to bury her in order to shield her delicate beauty from the eye of any stranger for she is the actualisation of “glory and splendour in [his] existence” (Hedayat 1957, p.3). On his way to the only cemetery of that region he catches the “sight of a bent old man sitting at the foot of a cypress tree” (p.20). Without the narrator uttering a word, the old man quips: “If you want a porter, I’m at your

service. Yes. I've got a hearse as well; I take dead bodies every day to Shah Abdo'l-Azim" (p.21).

The important point is that they intend to bury the girl (glory) in one of the previously glorious grave yards near the Shrine up a deserted hill in the city of Ray that wakens certain memories of the past. In fact, Rey, "the Bride of the World" (p.38), was an important centre from at least the eighth century B.C. and was the seat of a dynasty of Zoroastrian leader hosting historical monuments like Gebri Castle (a gunpowder manufacturing site dating back to Sassanid Empire in three thousand years ago), Cheshmeh-Ali Hill (famous for its supposed holy water back in eight thousand years ago), and Bibi ShahrBanoo tomb (a famous monument which Zoroastrians worshipped highly back in thousand years ago). Precisely, the city of Ray, Shah Abdo'l-Azim shrine, and myriad of references to graveyard and tombs in these certain places can be deemed allusions of the tale to the old Persia that serve as a graveyard for the glories of the past that were destroyed while Arabs were reigning the nation. Taherzadeh argues that with the conquest of Arabs "the barefooted and desert-treading victors . . . disrespected and destroyed magnificent buildings and temples that for many years served as worship-sites for Iranians and as kissing-sites (*buseh-gah*) for our predecessors" (quoted in Tavakoli-Targhi 2008, p.111).

From the outset of their departure toward the cemetery, we notice successive images attempting to lament and berate this burial and loss of identity. Yet, quite the contrary, he is burdening a sort of responsibility to protect her, even though she is dead. Continuing on his way to the cemetery, where his Aryan ancestors had been buried, is the line of "weird, crouching, accursed trees and windows like wild eyes of a man in a state of delirium"(p.22) that seek to cry out their concern of what awaits him ahead as if he is approaching a sort of death. Nonetheless, what colours this intensity is the description of the houses around him that provoke coldness in the heart of the passer-by and create the impression that "they had been built to house the ghosts of ethereal beings" (p.22). Arriving at the vicinity of the shrine he finds everywhere covered with morning glory, though scentless. This place that causes a certain –apparently familiar image to be created in the narrator's mind, functions as a place where other ethereal beings might have been buried while the morning glories mark them as more of virtuous and revered people. Indeed, they would reside in Ray long ago and the city looks frighteningly vacant now, causing both the residents and the city to be just a dusty part of the history. Hence, the shrine proves to be the only option to bury the girl for she is a descendant of the local ethereal people of Ray who has found her way into the present time, plunging the narrator into endless nostalgia.

The burial of the girl in the cemetery nearby which arises as a matter of controversy because of its special location and the impression it creates appears to help any sharp reader dig deep for much nuanced allusions. The old man seems to be quite a handy man to help the narrator bury the body. His sudden appearances and disappearances in certain times and places seem worthy of more attention. From the beginning of the story to the end, we find the old man's appearance in various positions tied to the name of the Cypress tree. At the very beginning he comes into the scene while squatting at the foot of a cypress tree with his grating laughter, shows up again in the moment of help near the very same place, and gradually finds their destination toward the cemetery set at the vicinity of another cypress tree, which is where he abruptly departs. Symbolically speaking, cypress tree represents vigour, stature, and life, while it is described as dead in the story. Historically speaking, its origin stretches back to when Prophet Zoroaster, asked to prove the divinity of his religion, plants his stick to grow into a cypress tree. Accordingly, "the cypress-tree story has become the folk explanation for the great cypress that is the symbolic centre of Iranian Zoroastrian villages these days" (Fischer 2004, p.68). Historic narratives testify that Zoroaster planted two amazingly large cypress trees as good omen during his lifetime: one in Faryumaz

(Sabzevar, Northeastern Iran) and the other one in Kashmar (Northeastern Iran), which although the latter “survived for thousands of years and outlasted so many generations that it seemed to defy death” (Edujee 2007, p.4) it was ultimately felled by the Arab “Caliph” (king) Mutawakkil, the felling of which heralded “a great tragedy in Iranian culture and literature, inspiring many poets and writers” (Tanavoli 2007, p.3).

Respectively this no more tree of the non-fictional world matches closely with the picture of the tree in Hedayat’s fiction, yet a tenuous evocation of its greatness still can be felt. In truth, the old man approaches the cypress tree in that very historic city since it is the only place left for the rare flashes of the glorified lineage of Zoroastrians and their heritage. What complements the astonishing series of incidents is the glazed jar or “a flower-vase from Rhages, from the ancient city of Rey” (Hedayat 1957, p.24) that the old man exhumes that strikes him with much surprise that soon leaves and charges the narrator nothing. Having buried her, he harmonizes her tombstone like the ones nearby by setting a bunch of morning glories upon it as an obvious act of glorification and commemoration and then leaves it behind to be a part of history. It is exactly in this very moment that he feels a great loss since she had gone and her “eyes which had been a lantern lighting [his] way had been extinguished forever” (p. 25).

The climax of the first tale can be surprising when he meets the grave digger and is given back the very same vase. He finds it a peculiar “almond-shaped panel framed in blue flowers of morning glory with the portrait of the face of a woman with great black eyes” (Hedayat 1957, 28) and to his astonishment when he juxtaposes it with his own handcrafts on pen cases he cannot find “an atom of difference between [his] picture and that on the jar; one might have been the reflection of the other in a mirror” (p. 29). In fact, the picture on the vase triggers in him a sense of guilt engendered by his act of burying the girl that he suspects he “had an ancient partner in sorrow” (p.30) with sores in mind like the one that eroded the narrator’s being like a kind of canker. This is how his nostalgic fantasy of meeting the girl in the real world of the city of Ray takes him on a journey of past exhibiting long story of honour and its burial deep under the grounds of history.

The first section of the tale happens in the Tehran of 1930s that witnessed multiple series of anarchies causing the people and artists to yearn for the glorified past again. Hedayat, in *The Blind Owl*, pictures a bizarre tale abound with references to the distant past when Aryan’s culture and religion (Zoroastrianism) were the creditable labels of Persians. In the first part he writes how the pleasurable, though evanescent, breezes of the remote past blow on an individual who has opted to live as a reclusive inhabitant, since the societal status seem nothing like what he can truly venerate. His isolated dwelling place amidst a ruined, yet historic city is a direct reflection of his nostalgia to revive or even live in the memories of the past. He portrays a girl personified as elusive and impalpable, modelling the Iranian cultural identity carrying the very majestic features of early Aryan people. He characterises an inscrutable old man who stands for the custodian of splendour of the past— symbolized by the clay pot – presumably to hand down the legacy of the past to the next generation. Ultimately, when the narrator understands that he has unconsciously inhumed the point of his nostalgia he goes delusional.

### TARNISHED LEGACY

The narrator who is overwhelmed by the series of odd events and a set of strange characters that left no traces of the nostalgia they arouse, finds no way to mollify himself and starts hallucinating. He dreams and starts his fantastic journey to a time in the past when he can observe the birthplace of his miseries, and a period in which his ancestors must have lost their values and legacies for the reality he lives with and has a complementary role to the first

narration. In his vision that presumably reverts him to post seventh-century Iran when a new culture and religion emerged, the narrator finds himself living a life similar to the one he does at present with the very same characters, though characteristically different. In reality, the second section goes much beyond the romantic and nostalgic mood we perceive in the first tale that directly brings into view how his glorious ancestors and legacies of pre-Islamic era must have changed into contemptible and undesirable folks and values; a metamorphosis that leaves nothing behind except a nostalgic feeling that remains after centuries.

Narrating a couple of tales with no linearity, Hedayat explores the life of three generations of Iranians with fixed characters. Initially, he tells the story of Iranians searching wistfully for their identity after centuries of struggle (first tale) and then brings into view the root of their miseries by picturing the unfavourable living conditions of post seventh-century Iran (second tale) that he offers through a nightmare with both tales continuously referring to pre-Islamic Iran as a glorious era to recall. The second tale places the narrator in the same setting, but in centuries earlier. He feels “as though the course of [his] life has been reversed. One by one, past experiences, past states of mind, and obliterated and lost memories of childhood recur to [him]” (Hedayat 1957, p.31). He moots the city of Ray as his living place its absolutely lifeless and abhorrent, and portrays himself as an old ‘odds-and-ends’ man selling such items at the nearby alley looking despicable, and the girl – now his legal wife – with the very same appearance, though hideous and morally repulsive. Indeed, it is with this state of delirium that the narrator finds the miraculous opportunity to explore the fate of his ancestor’s centuries ago and the way that the ethereal beings of old Persia have transformed into obnoxious beings among which he finds himself an alienated being.

The striking point that makes *The Blind Owl* an esoteric type of tale is its galaxy of characters with shifting attributes playing in twin settings. In the first place, the second tale seems to have nothing to do with first one except few shallow similarities of place and character to the point that one assumes they are two stories written by two different writers. However, upon close delving deeper into the matter, we realise that even the narrator’s eerie state of delirium at the onset of the story is betoken of a fraught voyage of self-discovery quite like the first one. Yet, despite the first narration that sets a nostalgic journey to capture the glorious and rare flashes of the past in old Persia the second narration turns out to be a heart-lacerating exploration of degradation of those glories alluding to the intrusion of Arabs. It is with this method of description that Hedayat is able to juxtapose two seemingly different tales into a coherent whole that functions as a downright critique of the present utilizing a remotely past time.

The character of the girl, who was the point of nostalgia for the narrator as representative of the Aryan people, comes to represent another group of people in a different era. She is the exact embodiment of women after the arrival of the Arabs and their culture that is in absolute incongruity with the image we perceive from the pre-Islamic women as represented by the ethereal girl. After the marriage that was nothing but an obligatory relationship based on lies and duplicity, she keeps him away and not letting him consummate their marriage by reasoning that “I haven’t said my prayer” (Hedayat 1957, p.45) or that “it’s the wrong time of the month,” (Hedayat 1957, p.45) demonstrating a superstitious and sanctimonious state. He desires to approach her, but to his dismay, he finds her engrossed more with her lovers than her legal spouse. Keeping her illegal relationships with others gets to its acme of depravity when she even refuses to return home at nights, pushing him to more isolation and madness. He even quips, “For two months – no, for two months and four days—I have slept apart from her on the floor and could not work up the courage to come near her” (p.46).

The fact that his being away from the girl in the first narration lasts for two months and four days – symbolizing two thousands and four hundred years of Aryan’s past glorious

era – brings vivid picture of the same nostalgic concept conveying not only sort of a (recent) loss of identity but also lamenting its excruciating decay after the changes. Such is Iran’s corrupt cultural status even after centuries of atrophy down to the modern era that witnessed even increasing turpitude concerning particularly the women, who were nothing like the ethereal beings of old Persia. Massoume Price states that:

Men of Hedayat’s era, for the first time in Iranian history, witnessed the transformation of the traditional Iranian women into the modern twentieth century women. The kind, who joined the ranks of the political parties, rallied, had lovers; performed abortions and even bore illegitimate children. They also challenged the bi-polar image of women as the virtuous versus the prostitute (1996, p.1).

Struggling in madness he recalls the memories of childhood and how “[his] wife and [he] used to sleep together in one cradle, a big double cradle” (Hedayat 1957, p.49) that verifies their inseparability/affinity, and wishes he could “sleep peacefully as [he] did in the days when [he] was an innocent child,” (Hedayat 1957, p.49 referring to the great days of yore. Yet, he keeps mentioning how long they have slept apart and that since their segregation his “room has become the tomb of his existence”(p.51); one that shrinks staidly and goes darker like a grave that makes him bury all his glorious memories and hopes. This is no wonder that he says, “I wish to escape from myself and change my destiny” (p.51); when he is unable to stand the status quo that seems not to be the ideal of what he truly deserves. Therefore, he denounces this conflict between his honoured ancestors (legacy) and the dishonoured descendants that happen to materialize in the form of a girl and is dramatically tarnished through a cultural and religious reformation as “a strange compound of incompatible elements” (p. 52).

In the first tale, the girl is the chaste and innocent incarnation of the narrator’s nostalgic feelings in a diseased present; he murders her in order to keep her free from any defilement, especially from strangers. In contrast to this obsessive concern, he feels nothing like what he felt for the girl who is not the exemplary innocent ethereal women of old Persia in the second tale. In this section, when the narrator disguises himself as the old man entering her room, he stabs her to death in a moment of intense passion finding himself one of the rabble-men. On the one hand, we can argue “the narrator commits murder as the only response open to an artist when his art/ideal has been systematically distorted” (Fischer 2004). On the other hand, however, his act of murdering the girl might stem from his deep-rooted desire to end her degrading existence that seems to have tarnished all the legacy of the majestic past. Therefore, he prefers to keep her buried and non-existent, deep under the ground for she is the absolute manifestation of the “sores which slowly erode [his] mind in solitude like a kind of canker” (p. 6).

The image that Hedayat provokes in the reader’s mind concerning the old man seems to be in contrast with the image he screens in the first part that proved the man vigilant and concerned about the past legacies. While the old man was the carrier and preserver of culture and tradition of old Persians, he reappears in the second section playing the role of a rabble-man with an unconventional look for an Iranian man. He appears as an old man “wearing a dirty scarf, a Shuster cloak, and an open shirt from which protrude the white hairs on his chest,” (p.39); a man who used to be a potter of pen-cases in his youth now selling old stuff in a spread covered with dust of centuries. He continues that, “on Thursday evenings he reads aloud from the Koran, revealing his yellow, gappy teeth as he does so. One might suppose that he earned his living by this Koran-reading for I have never seen anyone buy anything from him” (p. 40). This description, which is the exact mien of an Arab man with a turban on his head, keeps tormenting and puzzling him because he takes the man as a transformed



version of old Persians and the representative of the Arabs that invaded the country and brought depravity to it. Taherzadeh asserts that:

In a short time span the garden of civilized world (Persia) which was a product of many centuries of endeavour and had reached perfection, was transformed into a barren and green-less desert like Arabia. The colourful flowers of fine arts were uprooted . . . and all that glow, glory, and grandeur, eclipsed like sun (quoted in Tavakol-Targhi 2008, p.111).

The old man who appears in most of the narrator's nightmares as the subject of his fears not only evinces no features of a preserver of tradition or legacy of the past or an evocative statue of stature, but is also spotted as one of his wife's lovers that instigate a sort of corruption with his presence. This theme of change is also criticized when he "sees on [his] wife's face the mark of the two dirty, decayed teeth between which [the old man] used to recite" (Hedayat 1957, p.79) and finds her pregnant by the old man, enraging him since he is definitely not the father, the "child will look like the old man" (p.87). This can be the main reason why that he decides to murder both the mother and the child to nip all this degeneracy in the bud, though all in vain. The important point, however, is that the character of the old man that seems to be nomadic, yet residing permanently in the city of Ray in both sections, serves with two divergent roles. He is a virtual guard who usually squats near the majestic cypress tree to shield the city, its residents, and legacies from coming to any harm, but he is also the one who displays a set of disgusting and exotic characteristics, squatting in a dusty alley, leading the city and its inhabitants into downright decay and misery.

Apart from the girl and the old man as two obvious centres of change in comparison to the glorious past, Hedayat does not leave the narrator and the setting of the tale untouched either. "Whoever saw me yesterday saw a wasted, sickly young man" (Hedayat 1957, p.35) remarks the narrator; "today he would see a bent old man with white hair, burnt-out eyes and a hare-lip" (Hedayat 1957, p.35), detailing his own uniquely dramatic reappearance in tandem with the change from the twilight years of glory into intolerable years of misery. He sees a deep quagmire of unfamiliarity between himself and the rabble-men of post-glory era, alluding to his ancestors by referring to himself. Even the memories of his ancestors seem to have vanished in the suffocating ambience of his life among the rabbles that wiped out all the traditions and majesty of the past.

The city of Ray along with the narrator seems to have confronted decay as well. The bride of the world is now reshaped and misshaped into a "host of squat houses, schools, and caravanserais" (Hedayat 1957, p.38) beholding oddly new residents drowned in superstitions and hackneyed beliefs. Narrating the tale around 1900s, Hedayat castigates all the old beliefs that "for thousands of years people have been saying the same words, performing the same sexual act, vexing themselves with the same childish worries"(p.49) arising mainly from the emergence of a conflicting culture and religion back to a century ago. (Katouzian 1991) refers to Part I of *The Blind Owl* as "representing the narrator's life in the present, somewhere in the decaying early twentieth century Tehran" (1991, p.120) while Part II, as he argues, takes place "in thriving Ray of a golden past" (p.116) that is entirely tarnished right after seventh century.

Put simply, as the course of his life under the shadow of a new culture and religion drags on, he turns utterly confused and exasperated, finding himself a broken shell of a man sinking in alienation and decadence. Wandering around the city, he winds up at a strangely small, green enclosure surrounded by hills and covered with rotten morning glories. Surely, this vibrates amore certain feeling of familiarity as he squats beside a very old cypress tree that is in fact the graveyard of his ancestors and the splendour of the past. Yet, upon returning, he sees nothing but "a strange, unknown city" (Hedayat 1957, p.58) and a "horizon

covered with thick, yellow, deathly clouds weighing heavily upon the whole city” (p.70) as the city is markedly changed. Even the very same outlook of the city haunts him in a dream soon afterwards with the exact same details, yet realizing that “all the inhabitants of the town had died by some strange death” (p.69) proving the death of all his ancestors and values. Chapter by chapter, he loses his will power to keep himself mentally balanced from the diseased living condition of the rabble-men, though still feels a great tranquillity upon his “renunciation of all the religious beliefs which had been inculcated in him” (p.72). Nonetheless, when he feels the looming of death in his bones; a death of all his beliefs and values, he finds no way to revive glories of the past and murders the girl who is the symbol of inglorious changes in order to put his mind at rest.

Stunningly, the dénouement shows the awakening of the narrator from his traumatic dream of misery, finding the old man hustling away on the horizon with the jar that seems contrastive with what we expected from the old man of the reality section. Reversely, his features run in parallel with the disgusting old man of the secondary part that confirms the existence of non-Persian characteristics after centuries of struggle along with a narrator who seems like a rather imprudent preserver of the majestic memories of the past who lives a dream-like life of negligence, tarnishing the glories of the past. Respectively, waking up from this haunting dream along with the narrator, we can hold this fiction to be a cauldron of nightmare, disorientation, and anxiety that is kept tensely and precariously under control by a precise, agonized artistry, though with principles of dream symbolism.

To conclude, we can sum up the multiple portrayals of change throughout the novella as the writer’s penchant to revile the unwanted conversion of Zoroastrianism into a *deformed* version of Islam that he experiences in his own time, Persian culture into a non-native and conflicting culture, and honourable Aryan people into non-Aryan rabble-men. If we believe in Hedayat as an Iranian modernist – that he really is –then we cannot deny his intense desire and will to employ his art to bewail the loss of Zoroastrianism and Aryan’s pure identity that, as he thinks, have been overwhelmingly violated by what Tavakoli knows as “false piety and religious duplicity of his ‘mixed-race’ compatriots” (2008, p.107) that rose to power in Iran after the country succumbed to the invasive Arab forces. As such, Hedayat has employed his creative art to demonstrate the gradual degeneration of Persians’ rich legacy of culture along with debasement of its people. This perfectly clarifies what must have fostered Hedayat to narrate a couple of tales as bedrocks of criticism using a remotely past time as esteemed to recall.

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