

The Rhetoric of Self and Other in Selected Iranian Short Stories, 1906–1979

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The conflict that exists between the Western powers and Iran may seem a recent phenomenon, yet Iran's volatile perception of the West developed over several decades. The development of this perception is documented in six short stories written by the well-known Iranian writers Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, Bozorg 'Alavi, Sadeq Hedayat, Simin Daneshvar, Gholam-Hosain Sa'edi, and Jalal Al-e Ahmad. These stories are representative of how Iranians imagined themselves as a community and how the depiction of the Western Other, particularly the American, was instrumental in forming Iranians' perceptions of Self. Each story encapsulates the sociopolitical milieu of the time as well as the responses of dissident Iranian intellectuals to the same. The first three stories were written in the decades that began with the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911 and coincided with the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1922–1944). Three phases distinguish this period: one, Iranian nationalism replaces Islamic conceptions of Self; two, Iranian nationalism embraces Bolshevik internationalism; three, institutionalized nationalism assisted by Americans is rejected. Written after the emergence of the USA as the main Western power in Iran in August 1953, the next three stories demonstrate three new phases: one, a fear of religious and cultural conversion by the USA and succumbing to national chauvinism as a defense mechanism; two, the lack of national pride and independence; three, a return to conservative Islamic convictions, at the apex of which was the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah in February 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh's *Dusti-yi Khaleh Kherseh* (The friendship of Auntie Bear, 1922) focuses on actual sociopolitical events that were taking place in Iran during the years following the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911 and the First World War. Written at a time when Iran was being invaded by Russian, Turkish, and British forces, Jamalzadeh's story presents the tensions between two different worldviews among Iranians: the hero's view of boundless brotherhood as derived from the concept of "Islamic Ummah," and the narrator's view of Iran, in the words of Benedict Anderson, as an "imagined community" with a specific geography and history.¹ Jamalzadeh uses his noble but undiscerning hero, Habibollah, as the representation of the Iranian masses fallen prey to invading Russian forces. Habibollah saves a wounded Russian Cossack

¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso Press, 1991).

from dying, only to be killed by the same. The Russians do not adhere to the principles of universal and religious brotherhood as does the Iranian hero. Habibollah belongs to that "large cultural system," namely the moral community which must now submit to the ideas of nationalism.²

In Bozorg 'Alavi's *Raqs-e Marg* (Dance of death, 1937), the collective identities of "Western" characters are more complex than in Jamalzadeh's story. 'Alavi's multi-faceted map of otherness specifies a character's sociopolitical beliefs and defines his or her national, ethnic or religious background. His characters are "marginal," placed within contours that erase geographical boundaries and establish ideological demarcations between Self and Other.

'Alavi presents two types of Other: the absolutely evil Rajabov and the semi-benevolent Margarita. Rajabov, a Russified Muslim originally from Baku, Azerbaijan, in the USSR, represents the political ideology of a "white" Russian. Margarita, born of a Russian mother and an Iranian father, opposes and kills Rajabov. Thus, although only half-Iranian, Margarita receives sympathy as a victim and a hero, but Rajabov is despised regardless of the fact that he shares with Iranians his ethnic and religious background as an Azerbaijani and as a Muslim. 'Alavi also writes the story of three types of Self: the absolute evil, the absolute good, and a character in between. The Iranian political system and the Shah represent the evil Self. The semi-good Iranian, Morteza, is a young intellectual who falls in love with Margarita and chooses to be incarcerated in her place. The narrator, a nameless Iranian political prisoner, embodies the absolutely good Self. The political prisoner and Morteza read Western novels and listen to Western music, particularly Saint-Saëns's *Dance Macabre*, from which the story's title is derived. Morally and socially conscientious for the good of all Iranians, 'Alavi's narrator opposes injustice, defends the innocent and sings "The International" with other political prisoners. His version of nationalism embraces Bolshevik internationalism.

In *Takht-e Abu Nasr* (Abu Nasr's throne, 1941) neither Self nor Other escapes the ridicule and sarcasm of Sadeq Hedayat's intrusive and omniscient narrator who narrates a story within a story. The parallel narration of these two stories foreshadows many other thematic as well as metaphorical parallels operating in Hedayat's short story. Americans plunder ancient Iranian gems and jewels while ignorant Iranian workers and prostitutes serve them. By writing about the Americans, Hedayat comments on the life of Iranians.

Indeed, *Abu Nasr's Throne* presents an actual ancient site, Qasr-e Abu Nasr, which was excavated under the supervision of American archaeologists. Donald Whitcomb, an American archaeologist, writes: "The excavations at Qasr-i Abu Nasr should be considered in the context of the tremendous archaeological

² Anderson 12.

ferment in the Near East and Iran during the 1930s.³ The great expansion in archaeological discoveries happens at the same time that Reza Shah glorifies the ancient Iranian past, justifying his authoritarian regime as a continuation of dynastic tradition in Iran.⁴ Thus Hedayat's depiction of Self and Other in *Abu Nasr's Throne* corresponds to the Iranian monarch's quest for legitimation through links with the real or imagined glories of ancient Iran. The American expedition, under circumstances similar to their depiction in Hedayat's story, helped to achieve this legitimation. By showing an incestuous, jealous, murderous, and treacherous Self, Hedayat succeeds in deconstructing the socio-political constructs of Reza Shah.

An important political rupture in Iranian history—the fall of Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq's nationalist government with the help of the CIA in August 1953—separates the publication of Hedayat's *Abu Nasr's Throne* from Simin Daneshvar's *Id-e Iraniha* (The Iranians' New Year, 1961). In the intervening years Iran's concepts of nationalism and internationalism change considerably, with corresponding modifications in notions of Self and Other. This is due to two events: first, the emergence of America as the dominant Western Other, and second, perhaps as a response to the first, a greater assimilation of conservative values in the texture of national life.

Daneshvar's story manifests the concerns of the Iranian intelligentsia and manipulates the ideological opposition to American involvement. Her American family in *The Iranians' New Year*, the Micklesons,⁵ represents the American government's military, political, economic, and cultural designs on Iran. They mistake Haji Firuz—an Iranian cultural figure equivalent to Santa Claus—and dress him as a wandering minstrel only interested in making money. Nowruz (literally "new day"), the name of the new year holiday, is utilized to show that American plans will lead to destruction and continuous poverty. The cardboard shop that the Micklesons build for Haji Firuz and his father crumbles with the first strong wind. Later, during the funeral procession for Haji Firuz's father, Daneshvar shows Americans misinterpreting Islamic rites, substituting their own Christian beliefs. Daneshvar promulgates a specific sociopolitical message⁶ and

³ Donald S. Whitcomb, *Before the Roses and Nightingales: Excavations at Qasr-i Abu Nasr, Old Shiraz* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985) 13.

⁴ Mohammad Essad-Bey, an early biographer of Reza Shah, writes: "More and more, Reza Shah's theory is accepted that the potentialities of pre-Islamic Persia must be reawakened." *Reza Shah* (London: Hutchinson, 1938) 252.

⁵ The choice of this last name is intentional on Daneshvar's part. Here she is playing with the name of the cartoon character Mickey Mouse. In Daneshvar's satirical depiction, the Micklesons are the children of Mickey Mouse.

⁶ Daneshvar's depiction is based on what William B. Helmreich, in another context, calls "an exaggerated belief, oversimplification, or uncritical judgment about a category" of people. William B. Helmreich, *The Things They Say Behind Your Back* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982) 2-3.

by using “symbols of the community,”⁷ she writes for the consumption of Iranian readers and incites their religious conservatism and national chauvinism.

Gholam-Hosain Sa’edi’s *Dandil* (1961) further dramatizes the American involvement in Iran. Sa’edi’s concern for the Iranian lower classes appears in the context of the increasing American military involvement in Iran. Dandil, a red-light district, symbolizes Iranian society stricken with such ills as poverty, drug addiction, superstition, and prostitution.

Sa’edi’s American, an army sergeant, is ugly physically and morally. As the result of a plan devised by an Iranian policeman and Iranian pimps, he deflowers an innocent fifteen-year-old Iranian girl, a recent arrival and the only sign of purity in Dandil. The sergeant, protected by the policeman, refuses to pay the pimps who had hoped for a large reward. With the exception of a worker protesting the American’s privileged status, Sa’edi’s natives lack any sense of moral principle, patriotic sentiments or national independence, and although Sa’edi may excuse their exploitation of one another because of destitution, he condemns Iranian authorities who subjugate Iran to American hegemony.

Finally, in Jalal Al-e Ahmad’s *Showhar-e Amrika-ii* (The American husband, 1974), the Iranian author’s depiction of the Western Other is again intertwined with severe criticism of an Iranian character representing a type. Here, Al-e Ahmad depicts a “Westoxicated” (gharbzadeh) female Self as the protagonist.⁸ She is a middle-class Iranian woman who has fallen prey to the duplicities and bad influences of her American ex-husband. While in Iran the American poses as a teacher but actually works with SAVAK—the Iranian secret police. Later, when the couple moves to the USA, the American still hides from his wife his true job of grave-digging at Arlington Memorial cemetery. In a quoted monologue the length of the story, this Self narrates her victimization by her husband and the Iranian government. Thus, used as a negative example and as the author’s mouthpiece, the Iranian woman becomes the victim of Al-e Ahmad’s ideological fiction. The monologue serves the author as a mask for leveling criticism at this type of Self and the type of Other that the American represents. Only the divorcee’s xenophobic and religious grandmother remains free of criticism. This traditionally fundamentalist type of Self proves to be correct in her total distrust of the Other. Al-e Ahmad tends to embrace her conservative attitudes toward the marriage of Iranians with Americans (read, the marriage of American policies

⁷ I am borrowing this term from Charles R. Larson in his book *The Novel in the Third World* (Washington, DC: Inscape Publishers, 1976) 106.

⁸ Al-e Ahmad’s long essay, “Gharbzadehgi” (“Westoxication,” 1962), can provide a case for an extremely illuminating parallel study of his fictive text *The American Husband*. Though translated under the titles “Plagued by the West,” “Weststruckness,” and “Occidentosis,” I have found “Westoxication” a suitable translation for “Gharbzadehgi,” because Al-e Ahmad’s protagonist in *The American Husband* becomes intoxicated on whiskey as the story proceeds.

with Iranian sociopolitical and cultural life) and toward repelling the penetration of non-Iranians.

In conclusion, Iranian short story writers contributed actively to the development of Iranians' perception of Self and Other. During the seven decades that separate the two important Iranian revolutions of 1906 and 1979, these perceptions changed significantly. At first, Iranians moved away from an Islamic humanitarian view of Self and Other to create a space for the development of Iranian nationalism. Soon this new notion became secondary to Bolshevik internationalism. Later, American archaeologists helped disseminate a state-sponsored version of nationalism. The August 1953 CIA-backed coup d'état turned many Iranians, especially the intelligentsia, against the Americans and their subsequent policies of modernization in Iran. Starting in the late fifties, and continuing throughout the sixties and early seventies, Iranian dissident writers defied the Americanization of Iran, warning against the replacement of their Islamic heritage by Christianity and protesting the lack of Iranian political independence. Finally, they opted for a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam to fight against Western interferences and influences, particularly American.