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A Study on the circularity of *The Blind Owl* written by Sadegh Hedayat

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ABSTRACT

One of the most obvious and controversial matters seen in the modern literature is circularity of structure. Not being found only in the content of these works, i.e. the speech and thought of the characters, the incident and the actions of such works, circularity also penetrates to the form of such works. The case is that, circularity is not a futile element. It fortifies an aesthetic effect of the works on the reader to a great extent. Furthermore, it represents the circularity of human thought and life and consequently the circularity of his confusion and frustration what he cannot find a convincing answer for it and its occurrence. This article tries to discuss circularity in *The Blind owl* written by one of the most famous modern Iranian author Sadegh Hedayat.

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Introduction

The *Blind Owl* (1937) (in Persian: *Boof-e koor*) is Sadegh Hedayat's most enduring work of prose and a major literary work of 20th century Iran. Written in Persian, it tells the story of an unnamed pen case painter, the narrator, who sees in his macabre, feverish nightmares that "the presence of death annihilates all that is imaginary. We are the offspring of death and death delivers us from the tantalizing, fraudulent attractions of life; it is death that beckons us from the depths of life. If at times we come to a halt, we do so to hear the call of death... throughout our lives, the finger of death points at us." The narrator addresses his murderous confessions to the shadow on his wall resembling an owl. His confessions do not follow a linear progression of events and often repeat and layer themselves thematically, thus leading to the open-ended nature of interpretation of the story.

The Blind Owl was written during the oppressive latter years of Reza Shah's rule (1925-1941). It was originally published in a limited edition in Bombay, during Hedayat's year-long stay there in 1937, stamped with "Not for sale or publication in Iran." It first appeared in Tehran in 1941 (as a serial in the daily *Iran*), after Reza Shah's abdication and had an immediate and forceful effect. However it is believed that much of the novel had already been completed by 1930 while Hedayat was still a student in Paris.

It is the foremost work of twentieth-century Iranian fiction and remains tremendously influential, a Kafka in a literature that, while very rich, has no towering counter-balance such as a Mann, Hesse, or Musil. Without a clear 'plot' and often hallucinatory, *The Blind Owl* is also anything but a lucid text or story. The writing ranges from the incantatory to the raw; there's no doubt, too, that much is lost in translation. (D.P. Costello's translation in 1957 is a valiant and interesting effort).

The Significance of Sadegh Hedayat's Work

Sadegh Hedayat is one of the most prominent Persian story writers. Hedayat's works can be analyzed in two phases. In his *Bury Alive* (1930), *Three Drops of Blood* (1932) and *Blind Owl*

(1930) that form his first phase, he symbolically represents an agitated mind, the sufferings, and disappointment soul of his contemporary generation. His works of the second phase focus on the ordinary people and their superficial way of living. After his short stories in two collections named *Highlight* (1933) and *Ms. Alavie* (1933), and historical plays in the collection of *Parvin Daughter of Sasan* (1934), and *Maziar* (1933), he wrote *Vagh Vagh Sahab* (1934) that is a distinct and innovative work both structurally and formally among Iranian comic works in the matter of criticizing different aspects of narrow-mindedness and lack of foresight in Iranian life and culture. In years after (1934), under the influence of social movements, some kind of optimistic idealism awakes in his writings. As a regard, he follows his literary works more actively that is concluded in his being elected as a member of the executive committee of the Iranian Fifth Congress of Authors (1936). Moreover, he collaborates with two literary magazines *Sokhan* and *Payam-e-New*. Then, he writes some allegorical fables such as *The Water of Life* based on the left wing opinions. Following this, he permeates *Stray Dog* (1942) and *Being Astray* (1944). In *Haji Agha* (1945), he renders a perfect picture of financial capitalism in Iran. He permeates *the Fable of Creation* in France in 1946. In his *Pearl ball* (1948) that is not published in his lifetime, colonization, history and superstitious customs are satirized. In 1947-1949, he collaborates with Hassan Ghaemianin publishing some of Kafka's literary works and then writes *Kafka's Message* (1946) so as to interpreting Kafka's writings.

Statement of the Problem

Circularity, a structural feature in *The Blind owl*, is created by some elements of both form and content of this work and results in some consequences that fortify the effect of this work on its readers. The first purpose of this study is to show some of the most important elements in both form and content that create circularity. The second aim is to focus on the way in which circularity results in creating an aesthetic effect on the reader. The third problem that will be discussed is that in what way

circularity of the work reflects the circularity of the human life and its following confusions.

Research Questions

In order to provide an acceptable interpretation of circularity in *The Blind Owl*, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

- Which elements of the form and content result in creating the circularity in this work?
- How does circularity serve to create anaesthetic effect?
- How does circularity of the structure represents the circularity of the human thought and life and consequently the circularity of his confusion and frustration?

Significance of the study

Although many of Iranian critics and literary writers generally tried to clarify and explain some of the deep, mysterious, and symbolic aspects of Hedayat's works, not many of them focuses specifically on certain aspects of his works.

There is still a lot to do with his works so as his style is multi-facets and unique in the case of using first-hand images, using subjects which were considered taboos both culturally and religiously in Iranian native environment and dealing with psychological, existential, naturalistic, realistic, comic, absurd matters.

The researcher of the present study believes that the works of such an eminent Persian writer should be analyzed from the view point of specific literary approaches or to discover what specific literary features and devices of the modern literature they contain. Achieving the aim of discovering some specific literary features results in gathering some sound generalizations about the precious value of his writing based on evidence.

Review of literature

Andre Burton who was the founder of Surrealism in France read the translation of *The Blind Owl* and declared that Hedayat's work is one of the twenty top millstones of the twentieth century.

Henry Miller, one of the famous contemporary American writers stated that *The Blind Owl* is the best book that he ever had read.

Rene Lano believes that the importance of art is explicitly evident in *The Blind Owl* (quoted by Daryabandary, 2001, 154). Daryoosh Mehrjoe, an Iranian cinema director, indicates that he was inspired by *The Blind Owl* in constructing one of his movies named Hamoon. He believed that *The Blind owl* is the first Iranian literary work which corresponds to the methods of modernism. That in fact had been started in Europe a century and a half before, i.e. the emergence of a self-conscious man and the matter of humanity's fate (Ramin Jahanbinglo, 125).

Masoume Price believes that Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* is one of the most important literary works in Persian language. The central theme of the story is an attempt toward the resolution of the writer/narrator'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/women (Masoume Price.).

Methodology

One of the most important ways of creating confusion in modern literary works is circularity of the plot structure. Circularity means no conclusion or resolution can offer in a work because such works are circular and repetitive in nature. The structure of every part, if there is any part divisions, is alike. The traditional works of literature have an introduction of the

characters, exposition of one or some problems in relation to its characters and setting, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. Moreover, in traditional works, the characters are developed and the reader or audience gradually comes to see the author's world view. This kind of development is called a linear development (Heise, Ursula, 1997,77). But as it was mentioned earlier, in some modern works the structure is exactly vice versa. In such works there is a circular structure, and consequently, most aspects of such works support this circular structure in one way or another.

In such works the setting and time seem to be the same and fixed. The sameness of the structure in most parts of the work is so obvious that it cannot be neglected and it can be felt even by non-professional readers. Some points in action, setting and incidents are grotesquely so exaggerated and overstated that it seems that every part is consisted of some irrelevant events that are not logically relevant and cannot be considered as a unified whole. Although there is representation of the events, incidents and characters, no more explanation is offered to the reader or, in the case of dramatic works, to the audience. Such works make the readers rotate in a circular whirl.

The fact is that circularity of most events and situations is not futile. On the one hand, it serves the aim of creating some aesthetic effect on the reader, and on the other hand, it reflects the circularity of incidents and thought in the life and mind of the real people).

For understanding the meaning of aesthetics effect, one should define aesthetics and explain it. Aesthetics is a concept that relates to the beauty in both nature and art, as something enlivens or invigorates both body and mind, awakening the senses. (Conolly and Haydar, 2003, 114-125). Aesthetics can be better understood by investigating general preferences in art, from interpreting results in experimental psychology (Pickford, 1972).

Aesthetics (also spelled æsthetics or esthetics) is a branch of philosophy dealing with the nature of beauty, art, and taste, and with the creation and appreciation of beauty (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2003). It is more scientifically defined as the study of sensory or sensory-emotional values, sometimes called judgments of sentiment and taste (Zangwill, 2003) More broadly, scholars in the field define aesthetics as "critical reflection on art, culture and nature." (Kelly, 1998, ix)

From the late 17th to the early 20th century Western aesthetics underwent a slow revolution into what is often called modernism. German and British thinkers emphasized beauty as the key component of art and of the aesthetic experience, and saw art as necessarily aiming at absolute beauty.

For Immanuel Kant the aesthetic experience of beauty is a judgment of a subjective but similar human truth, since all people should agree that "this rose is beautiful" if it in fact is. However, beauty cannot be reduced to any more basic set of features (Kant, 1790). For Friedrich Schiller aesthetic appreciation of beauty is the most perfect reconciliation of the sensual and rational parts of human nature (Schiller, 1795).

For Oscar Wilde the contemplation of beauty for beauty's sake was not only the foundation for much of his literary career but was quoted as saying "Aestheticism is a search after the signs of the beautiful. It is the science of the beautiful through which men seek the correlation of the arts. It is, to speak more exactly, the search after the secret of life." (Ellman, 1988, 159) He added by beautifying the outward aspects of life, one would beautify the inner ones." The English Renaissance was, he said,

"like the Italian Renaissance before it, a sort of rebirth of the spirit of man"(Ellman, 1988, 164)

Hogarth thinks that beauty consists of (1) fitness of the parts to some design; (2) variety in as many ways as possible; (3) uniformity, regularity or symmetry, which is only beautiful when it helps to preserve the character of fitness; (4) simplicity or distinctness, which gives pleasure not in itself, but through its enabling the eye to enjoy variety with ease; (5) intricacy, which provides employment for our active energies, leading the eye on "a wanton kind of chase"; and (6) quantity or magnitude, which draws our attention and produces admiration and awe (Paulson, 1971).

Background and Summary of *The Blind Owl*

Much of this work of fiction is like a spreading sore, the pain it causes sharp and relentless, dulled only by the fog of opium and dream which makes it bearable. There are five parts to the novel, the first, third, and closing chapters very short, the other two far more elaborate.

It starts with the statement; "There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker. (*The Blind Owl*)" This opening sentence is almost a summary of *The Blind Owl*, which is a study in alienation and estrangement.

Its first part describes a dream sequence in which the first-person narrator spies, through a window which then disappears, a woman in black under a cypress tree. Becoming obsessed, he searches for her without success, until she turns up on his doorstep and then dies in his bed, following which he dismembers her body and buries it in the ancient city of Rey.

"It was not long before sunset and a fine rain was falling. I began to walk and involuntarily followed the wheel-tracks of the hearse. When night came on I lost the tracks but continued to walk on in the profound darkness, slowly and aimlessly, with no conscious thought in my mind, like a man in a dream. I had no idea in what direction I was going. Since she had gone, since I had seen those great eyes amid a mass of coagulated blood, I had felt that I was walking in a profound darkness which had completely enshrouded my life. Those eyes which had been a lantern lighting my way had been extinguished for ever and now I did not care whether or not I ever arrived at any place. (*The Blind Owl*)"

The second part of *The Blind Owl* reveals the background to this dream. The narrator is ill, deranged, and taking opium, however, and this account is just as disturbing and only slightly less surreal. A painter of pen case covers, he is an invalid being looked after by an old nanny and his wife, whom he calls "the bitch" and who he imagines is sleeping with every man she meets. His fevered mind returns repeatedly to the same ideas and images, and to the limited compass of his life: stories from his childhood, the contents of his room, and the butcher's shop and knick-knack seller he can see from his window. These are the same materials that went into the preceding dream.

"Other things which brought their contribution of anxiety and fear were my coughing, which sounded like that of the gaunt, black horses in front of the butcher's shop; my spitting, and the fear lest the phlegm should some day reveal a streak of blood, the tepid, salty liquid which rises from the depths of the body, the juice of life, which we must vomit up in the end; and the continuous menace of death, which smashes for ever the fabric of the mind and passes on. (*The Blind Owl*)"

While narrated in the first person, there is no unified account here. Eventually he observes:

However, in order to explain my life to my stooping shadow, I am obliged to tell a story. Ugh! How many stories about love, copulation, marriage and death already exists, not one of which tells the truth! How sick I am of well-constructed plots and brilliant writing!

The narrator seeks escape from the bottom of his heart he desired to surrender himself to the sleep of oblivion. If only oblivion were attainable, if it could last forever, if his eyes as they closed could gently transcend sleep and dissolve into non-being and he should lose consciousness of his existence for all time to come, if it were possible for his being to dissolve in one drop of ink, in one bar of music, in one ray of colored light, and then these waves and forms were to grow and grow to such infinite size that in the end they faded and disappeared -- then he should have attained his desire.

He falls back on "the wonder-working drug" opium, which offers some release:

his thoughts acquired the subtlety and grandeur which only opium can confer and he sank into a condition between sleep and coma.

It is a temporary respite, of course, and doesn't go nearly far enough: what he is comforted by is "the prospect of oblivion after death", a vacuum that, finally, won't need be filled. As to the conventional alternative: "The thought of an after-life frightened and fatigued me. (*The Blind Owl*)"

Other escapes, before that final one can be reached, include the painting of the same motif on pen-boxes -- his occupation at the beginning of the novel -- and the attempt: "to vent on paper the horrors of my mind", as he acknowledges:

It would seem that the behavior, thoughts, aspirations and customs of the men of past ages, as transmitted to later generations by the medium of such stories, are among the essential components of human life. For thousands of years people have been saying the same words, performing the same sexual act, vexing themselves with the same childish worries.

This issue of transmission is one that figures throughout the novel, from the single image of a girl offering a flower of morning glory to a handing on from one generation to the next. Tellingly, the narrator is not even sure who his father is -- his father or his uncle -- and, similarly, his wife (a woman who is his foster-sister, and whom he winds up marrying in large part because of her resemblance to his aunt (though he is, in fact "forced to marry her")) sleeps with many other men but not him, preventing any family and next generation from properly developing: throughout, conventional transmission is thwarted, leaving the narrator spinning in his odd circles. At the beginning the narrator admits: "My one fear is that tomorrow I may die without having come to know myself" (*The Blind owl*).

His account is an attempt at reaching self-knowledge. *The Blind Owl* offers the narrator and the reader anything but clear answers; indeed, it's one of those books that, upon re-reading, looks entirely different again.

Circularity of the content and form of *The Blind Owl*

Hedayat achieves to the circularity of the content and the form through using some thematic and formal elements that will be presented in the following part under the separate heading of circularity of the content and that of the form.

Circularity of the content

1. **Time and its resulted apprehension and sorrow.** In *The Blind Owl*, time is not simply limited to the present life but it contains other lives belonging to the past that both penetrate and affect to the present life. It seems that a metaphysical aspect is

added even to the description of the most ordinary matters, events and objects that makes everything both in reach and out of reach. Some kind of halo of misgiving surrounded the fact and reality; therefore, recognizing and discriminating the exact realm of fact and illusion is impossible.

2. Fluctuation between reality and imagination. The apparent frontiers between reality and imagination collapses, they take the position of each other and fortify each other. Once imagination influences reality both in sleep or awakening, it changes to a means for discovering the real fact.

3. Inconsolable and otherworldly love. A kind of same love appears in all the main characters in turn. In such incarnation, the beloved face takes two aspects of a woman's face both hellish and heavenly. She is demonstrated as a mercy angle and a demonic one. This love is more frustrated and what is mostly desired is the beloved's soul not solely her body. Such woman takes the role of the main character's mother, wife, aunt and a mysterious and superstitious dancer. Sometimes all these women gather together and unified in one image and sometimes they divide in separate personalities and characters with their unique existence.

4. Identity and multiplied personality. In *The blind Owl*, having more identities is one of the most important aspects of circularity. It seems that not only nothing is fixed about the identity of the characters but there is also no fix identity and it results in suspense in their relationships. One the other hand, the narration the narrator's uncle and father, his wife and his brother-in-law, the coachman, the butcher, grave-digger and the man sells second hands seems to have the same characteristics. The narrator, the painter on the old urns, and pen-cases, the old man selling second hands, his father and uncle all reflects one another or represents other aspects of the narrator's personality.

5. The ever-presence of death and a kind of metaphysical sensibility. *The Blind Owl* is deathful. There is a kind of pessimism and despair in dealing with death. Whole the world is futile and void for the protagonist. He feels that although he and the others are near each other, there is a great distance among them no matter they are relative or neighbor. Being emotionally far and near penetrates into each other and cannot be estimated in a linear form, in contrary, it is circular, void and irresistible for the protagonist.

6. Suffering from a non-exemption sin. This sin is rooted in the state of being, presence and living. Consequently, human beings generally and the protagonist specifically are in force to bear its torment in their lives. It turns down through history and generations.

7. Mythology and ancient religions and superstition. The protagonist ridicules the accepted religion of his fellowmen for he thinks that the believers in the common religion are illiterate and ordinary people who are hypocrites and they deceive themselves by pretending to be believers and doing vice versa in practice. In contrast, he takes refuge in Indian Buddhism and some unknown and superstitious religions which believes in circularity of the life cycle and being. However, it seems that he is not following a firm set of beliefs. Sometimes when he is not more than an opium eater, he does not believe in anything but some dim images. In general, he fluctuates in the circle that has no angle with a clear direction of being a believer, not a believer, a mockery of the others' accepted religious beliefs and something in between.

Circularity in the Form of *The Blind Owl*

Another aspect that fortifies circularity of the content is the circular form of *The Blind Owl*. As M. H. Abrams defines "... the form of a work is the principle that determines its organization" (*A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 1985, 6th ed., 72). How *The blind Owl* is organized? It is a short novel or a novelette not more than 87 pages. It starts with a dim statement dealing with some sorrows in human beings' life. The dim and pessimist atmosphere shadows on whole the incidents and thoughts. Some formal features that will be demonstrated in the following parts enhance the hollow, unbearable and disgusting life of the protagonist that has a scattered and multi aspect identity that has a circularly repeated nature.

1. Pessimist words. Using pessimist, shadowy and dim words is apparent from very beginning of *The Blind Owl*. Even one of the two words used in the title, i.e. blind, and six words of the total ten lexical words of the first line represent the sadistic, negative and dark atmosphere. Some of the words used in this work are scar, doubtful, poisonous, void, nasty, terrible, poverty, hollow, darkness, dirty, stupid, drunkard, opium, stiff and harsh giggle, motionless, torture, soulless, the dead, break down, and so on. For example, the first page contains nearly 215 lexical words that about 40 of them are absolutely gloomy and dark with hopeless intonation and the high frequency of using such gloomy words continues throughout the work.

2. Using repeated words, phrases, sentences and even paragraphs. The case of the circularity penetrates the whole of to the words, sentence and paragraphs that occur repeatedly through this work. Such repetition is so tangible that even in looking through the pages, one can evidently notices it.

3. Grammatical pauses (full stop, colon, semi-colon and dash) in the text. Grammatical pauses are helpful levers for the writer to represent mental breakdowns, doubts, suspicions, fear, hesitation, bewilderment and so forth. Comas and full stops are almost used normally at their regular positions, i.e. at the end of the sentence in the case of full stops and among shorter units of the sentences in the case of comas. But one strange point is in using short dashes in nearly all pages. The number of such dashes in most pages increase more than one e.g. in the first page there are four and in the second page six dashes. If one replaces such dashes with comas and in more cases with full stops, no deficiency of meaning endangers the total meaning of the work. So, it can be concluded that nearly high frequency of using such unusual marks serves some deep and effective aesthetic effect on the readers. Moreover, there are lots of exclamation and question marks that reflects a perplexed and bewildered mind that is unable to make a satisfactory decision about his state of being, one who ask questions about his love, life and identity and still is not able to understand the causes of his troublesome life and scattered self.

4. Seven formal breaks dividing the text. These divisions, which are in the form of a line made out of the consequent dots, do not occur in the same intervals of the text. The first division is put just six paragraphs from the very beginning of the work that turns back the narrators mind from present to the past incidents of his life. The second break is located twenty-three pages later after his semi-real and semi-illusive adventures of seeing a strange angel like woman, his strange way in making love with her, slathering and burying her in companion with a man that following this part will be unified in his identity with the butcher, the second-hand seller, the protagonist's uncle, father and himself. The third break that occurs not far more than

a page recounts his awakening in a new world that causes a kind of torment in his conscience. He thought that it was a long time that he was waiting to be arrested. The fourth break is twenty-seven pages in which he wonders his state of being and gives a picture of the neighborhood in which he is living, the story of his father, uncle, mother, their love story and following consequences, his aunt, his cousin that is his wife now. In the fifth break, the borders between reality and illusion are more shattered. The sixth break is only one paragraph long, in which the protagonist thinks that his life is totally illusion and unbelievable. In the seventh break that is thirteen pages, the protagonist is not able to understand the meaning of what he is saying or hearing he just amuses himself by the vibration of his voice. He cannot recognize the oppositions between his state of being grown-up and his childhood. Eventually, he cannot resist his doubt about his wife as a faithful woman and consequently he slanders her. The eighth break is in fact the last page of this short novel. It is a short description of the protagonist's states, his room with foggy windows and a turn off fire and an old crooked man who escaped from the doorway of his room with an old vase under his arm. The list line does not end in full stop but in three dots representing continuity. The last sentences are some of the most repeated ones in this work.

Conclusion

The Blind Owl is a bleak but compelling vision and a masterly psychological portrait. *The Blind Owl*, though well-constructed, subverts traditional plot; Hedayat's writing, too, is meant to challenge conventional 'brilliant' use of language (though, again, that's hard to fully get in the translation). The narrator describes scenes from his life, ranging from singular impressions that haunt him, as in the brilliant vision of a great beauty offering an old man a morning glory that he sees while peering through a small hole in the wall, to more extended descriptions of his loveless marriage or his parents (including the outrageous test his mother demanded his father and his father's twin-brother subject themselves to). Much passes in a sort of distanced reverie: he is hardly a man of action, unable to impose even the slightest will on his wife, who sleeps around with everyone else; unable to come any closer to the great beauty that haunts his imagination. Tellingly, even the aperture in the wall through which he saw the indescribably beautiful girl disappears, blocking him off entirely from his vision. The summary of such plot shows the requirement in using a circular structure that occurs through the combination of circularity both in the content and form. The author achieves this aim by benefiting the embedded capabilities of the content by focusing on the circular nature of time, fluctuation between reality and imagination, inconsolable love, inconsistent identities and multiple personalities, the ever-present existence of death, suffering from eternal sin, and the shadowy belief in mythology and superstition. On the other hand, the apparent circularity in the form of this work fortifies circular structure, e.g. using dark and gloomy words, repetition in words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, grammatical pauses, and the main text divisions.

It can be inferred from the above mentioned matters that *The Blind Owl* achieves aesthetics effects on the reader through representing the dark sides of human soul, its fears and frustrations by benefiting artistic and circular descriptions and

selecting the best suited narrative point of view. Reading this work, the reader tries to have a critical reflection and decides emotionally whether to sympathize with, be indifferent towards or antipathies with the protagonist. The aesthetic effects create through delivering aesthetic experience, whatever it accomplishes by content of the work that is familiar for all because it is common to all, and the formal feature of the work that affect on the senses of the reader. To sum up, both artistic content and form create an artistic structure that consequently arise an aesthetic effect by creating an aesthetic experience that penetrate to human emotions and senses.

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