

Three Drops of Blood

Sadeq Hedayat

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Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>Sadeq Hedayat: His Life and Works</i> | v |
| <i>Three Drops of Blood</i> | 1 |
| Hajji Morad | 3 |
| Three Drops of Blood | 9 |
| The Legalizer | 19 |
| Whirlpool | 29 |
| Fire-Worshipper | 41 |
| Abji Khanom | 45 |
| The Stray Dog | 53 |
| The Broken Mirror | 61 |
| Davoud the Hunchback | 67 |
| Madeline | 71 |
| Dash Akol | 75 |
| The Man Who Killed his Passions | 85 |
| Buried Alive | 99 |
| <i>Notes</i> | 116 |

Sadeq Hedayat: His Life and Works

S ADEQ HEDAYAT WAS BORN on 17th February 1903 and died on 9th April 1951. He was descended from Rezaqoli Khan Hedayat, a notable nineteenth-century poet, historian of Persian literature and author of *Majma' al-Fosaha*, *Riyaz al-'Arefin* and *Rawza al-Safa-ye Naseri*. Many members of his extended family were important state officials, political leaders and army generals, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Hedayat is the author of *The Blind Owl*, the most famous Persian novel both in Iran and in Europe and America. Many of his short stories are in a critical realist style and are regarded as some of the best written in twentieth-century Iran. But his most original contribution was the use of modernist, more often surrealist, techniques in Persian fiction. Thus, he was not only a great writer, but also the founder of modernism in Persian fiction.

Having studied at the exclusive St Louis French missionary school in Tehran, Hedayat went to Europe, supported by a state grant, spending a year in Belgium in 1926–27, a year and a half in Paris in 1928–29, two terms in Reims in 1929 and a year in Besançon in 1929–30. Having still not finished his studies, he surrendered his scholarship and returned home in the summer of 1930. This provides a clue to his personality in general, and his perfectionist outlook in particular, which sometimes resulted in nervous paralysis.

Back in Tehran, Hedayat became the central figure among the *Rab'eh*, or Group of Four, which included Mojtaba Minovi, Bozorg Alavi and Mas'ud Farzad, but had an outer belt including Mohammad Moqaddam, Zabih Behruz and Shin Partaw. They were all modern-minded and critical of the literary establishment, both for its social traditionalism and intellectual classicism. They were also resentful of the literary establishment's contemptuous attitude towards themselves, and its exclusive hold over academic posts and publications.

In the early 1930s, Hedayat drifted between clerical jobs. In 1936 he went to Bombay at the invitation of Sheen Partaw, who was then an Iranian diplomat in that city. Predictably, he had run afoul of the

official censors, and in 1935 was made to give a pledge not to publish again. That was why when he later issued the first, limited edition of *The Blind Owl* in Bombay, he wrote on the title page that it was not for publication in Iran, predicting the possibility of a copy finding its way to Iran and falling into the hands of the censors.

During the year in Bombay, he learnt the ancient Iranian language Pahlavi among the Parsee Zoroastrian community, wrote a number of short stories and published *The Blind Owl* in fifty duplicated copies, most of which he distributed among friends outside Iran.

He was back in Tehran in September 1937, although he had returned with great reluctance and simply because he did not feel justified in continuing to depend on his friend's hospitality in Bombay. In 1939, he joined the newly founded Office of Music as an editor of its journal, *Majelleh-ye Musiqi* (*The Music Magazine*). It was literary work among a small group of relatively young and modern intellectuals, including Nima Yushij, the founder of modernist Persian poetry. He might well have regarded that as the most satisfactory post he ever had.

It did not last long. After the Allied invasion of Iran and abdication of Reza Shah in 1941, the Office of Music and its journal were closed down, and Hedayat ended up as a translator at the College of Fine Arts, where he was to remain till the end of his life. He also became a member of the editorial board of Parviz Khanlari's modern literary journal *Sokhan*, an unpaid but prestigious position. Even though the country had been occupied by foreign powers, there were high hopes and great optimism for democracy and freedom upon the collapse of the absolute and arbitrary government. The new freedom – indeed, licence – resulting from the Reza Shah's abdication led to intense political, social and literary activities. The modern educated elite were centred on the newly organized Tudeh party, which was then a broad democratic front led by Marxist intellectuals, although by the end of the '40s it had turned into an orthodox communist party. Hedayat did not join the party even in the beginning, but had sympathy for it and had many friends among Tudeh intellectuals.

But the party's support for the Soviet-inspired Azerbaijan revolt in 1946, which led to intense conflicts within its ranks, and the sudden collapse of the revolt a year later, deeply upset and alienated Hedayat from the movement. He had always been a severe and open critic of established Iranian politics and cultural traditions, and his break with

radical intellectuals made him a virtual émigré in his own land. This was a significant contribution to the depression he suffered in the late 1940s, which eventually led to his suicide in Paris in 1951.

For some time his close friend Hasan Shahid-Nura'i, who was serving as a diplomat in France, had been encouraging him to go to Paris. There were signs that his depression was deepening day by day. He was extremely unhappy with his life in Tehran, not least among intellectuals, many of whom were regularly describing him as a “petty-bourgeois demoralizer”, and his work as “black literature”.

Through his letters to friends one may observe, not far underneath the surface, his anger and despair, his acute sensitivity, his immeasurable suffering, his continuously darkening view of his own country and its people, and his condemnation of life. Through them, perhaps more than his fiction, one may see the three aspects of his predicament: the personal tragedy, the social isolation and the universal alienation.

In a letter which he wrote in French to a friend in Paris four years before his last visit, he had said:

The point is not for me to rebuild my life. When one has lived the life of animals which are constantly being chased, what is there to rebuild? I have taken my decision. One must struggle in this cataract of shit until disgust with living suffocates us. In *Paradise Lost*, Reverend Father Gabriel tells Adam “Despair and die”, or words to that effect. I am too disgusted with everything to make any effort; one must remain in the shit until the end.

Ultimately, what he called “the cataract of shit” proved too unbearable for him to remain in it till the end.

Hedayat's fiction, including novels, short stories, drama and satire, written between 1930 and 1946, comprises *Parvin Dokhtar-e Sasan* (Parvin the Sasanian Girl), *Afsaneh-ye Afarinesh* (The Legend of Creation), ‘*Al-bi'tha(t) al-Islamiya ila'l-Bilad al-Afranjiya*’ (Islamic Mission to European Cities), *Zنده beh Gur*, (Buried Alive), *Aniran* (Non-Iranian), *Maziyar*, *Seh Qatreh Khun* (Three Drops of Blood), *Alaviyeh Khanom* (Mistress Alaviyeh), *Sayeh Roshan* (Chiaroscuro) *Vagh-vagh Sabab* (Mr Bow-Vow), *Buf-e Kur* (The Blind Owl), ‘*Sampingé*’ and ‘*Lunatique*’ (both in French), *Sag-e Velgard* (The Stray Dog), *Hajji Aqa*, *Velengari* (Mucking About), and *Tup-e Morvari* (The Morvari Cannon).

I have classified Hedayat's fiction into four analytically distinct categories, although there is some inevitable overlapping between them: romantic nationalist fiction, critical realist stories, satire and psycho-fiction.

First, the romantic nationalist fiction. The historical dramas – *Parvin* and *Maziyar*, and the short stories 'The Shadow of the Mongol' (*Sayeh-ye Moghol*), and 'The Last Smile' (*Akharin Labkhand*) – are on the whole simple in sentiment and raw in technique. They reflect sentiments arising from the Pan-Persianist ideology and cult which swept over the Iranian modernist elite after the First World War. 'The Last Smile' is the most mature work of this kind. Hedayat's explicit drama is not highly developed, and he quickly abandoned the genre along with nationalist fiction. But many of his critical realist short stories could easily be adapted for the stage with good effect.

The second category of Hedayat's fictions, his critical realist works, are numerous and often excellent, the best examples being '*Alaviyeh Khanom*' (Mistress Alaviyeh) which is a comedy in the classical sense of the term, '*Talab-e Amorzesh*' (Seeking Absolution), '*Mohalleh*' (The Legalizer), and '*Mordeh-khor-ha*' (The Ghouls). To varying degrees, both satire and irony are used in these stories, though few of them could be accurately described as satirical fiction.

They tend to reflect aspects of the lives and traditional beliefs of the contemporary urban lower-middle classes with ease and accuracy. But contrary to views long held, they are neither "about the poor or downtrodden", nor do they display sympathy for their types and characters. Wretchedness and superstition are combined with sadness, joy, hypocrisy and occasionally criminal behaviour. This was in the tradition set by Jamalzadeh (though he had more sympathy for his characters), enhanced by Hedayat and passed on to Chubak and Al-e Ahmad in their earlier works.

Coming to the third category, Hedayat's satirical fiction is rich and often highly effective. He was a master of wit, and wrote both verbal and dramatic satire. It takes the form of short stories, novels, as well as short and long anecdotes. They hit hard at their subjects, usually with effective subtlety, though sometimes outright lampooning, denunciation and invective reveal the depth of the author's personal involvement in his fictional satire.

Hajji Aqa is the longest and most explicit of Hedayat's satires on the political establishment. Superficial appearances and critical propaganda notwithstanding, it is much less a satire on the ways of the people of the bazaar and much more of a merciless attack on leading conservative politicians. Indeed, the real-life models for the Hajji of the title were supplied by two important old-school (and, as it happens, by no means the worst) politicians.

Hedayat would have had a lasting and prominent position in the annals of Persian literature on account of what I have so far mentioned. What has given him his unique place, nevertheless, is his psycho-fiction, of which *The Blind Owl* is the best and purest example. This work and the short story 'Three Drops of Blood' are modernist in style, using techniques of French symbolism and surrealism in literature, of surrealism in modern European art and of expressionism in the contemporary European films, including the deliberate confusion of time and space. But most of the other psycho-fictional stories – e.g. 'Zنده beh Gur' ('Buried Alive'), 'Arusak-e Posht-e Pardeh' ('Puppet behind the Curtain'), 'Bon-bast' ('Dead End'), 'Tarik-khaneh' ('Dark Room'), 'Davud-e Guzhposht' ('Davud the Hunchback') and 'The Stray Dog' – use realistic techniques in presenting psycho-fictional stories.

The appellation "psycho-fictional", coined by myself in the mid-1970s to describe this particular genre in Hedayat's literature, does not render the same sense as is usually conveyed by the well-worn concept and category of "the psychological novel". Rather, it reflects the essentially subjective nature of the stories, which brings together the psychological, the ontological and the metaphysical in an indivisible whole.

Hedayat's psycho-fictional stories, such as 'Three Drops of Blood' and 'Buried Alive', which are published together in this volume, are macabre and, at their conclusions, feature the deaths of both humans and animals. Most human beings are no better than *rajjaleh* (rabble), and the very few who are better fail miserably to rise up to reach perfection or redemption. Even the man who tries to "kill" his nafs, to mortify his flesh, or destroy his ego, in the short story 'The Man Who Killed His Ego' ends up by killing himself; that is, not by liberating but by annihilating his soul. Women are either *lakkateh* (harlots), or they are *Fereshteh*, that is, angelic apparitions who wilt and disintegrate upon appearance, though this is only true of women

in the psycho-fictions, women of similar cultural background to the author, not those of lower classes in his critical realist stories.

As a man born into an extended family of social and intellectual distinction, a modern as well as modernist intellectual, a gifted writer steeped in the most advanced Persian as well as European culture, and with a psyche which demanded the highest standards of moral and intellectual excellence, Hedayat was bound to carry, as he did, an enormous burden, which very few individuals could suffer with equanimity, especially as he bore the effects of the clash of the old and the new, and the Persian and the European, such as few Iranians have experienced. He lived an unhappy life, and died an unhappy death. It was perhaps the inevitable cost of the literature which he bequeathed to humanity.

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June 2008

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Three Drops of Blood

Hajji Morad

(from *Buried Alive*)

H AJJI MORAD SWIFTLY JUMPED OFF the platform of his shop. He gathered about him the folds of his tunic, tightened his silver belt, and stroked his henna-dyed beard. He called Hasan, his apprentice, and together they closed the shop. Then he pulled four *rials* from his large pocket and gave them to Hasan, who thanked him and with long steps disappeared whistling among the bustling crowd. Hajji threw over his shoulders the yellow cloak he had put under his arm, gave a look around, and slowly started to walk. At every footstep he took, his new shoes made a squeaking sound. As he walked, most of the shopkeepers greeted him and made polite remarks, saying, "Hello Hajji. Hajji, how are you? Hajji, won't we get to see you?..."

Hajji's ears were full of this sort of talk, and he attached a special importance to the word "Hajji". He was proud of himself and answered their greetings with an aristocratic smile.

This word for him was like a title, even though he himself knew that he had never been to Mecca. The closest he had ever come to Mecca was Karbala,* where he went as a child after his father died. In accordance with his father's will, his mother sold the house and all their possessions, exchanged the money for gold and, fully loaded, went to Karbala. After a year or two the money was spent, and they became beggars. Hajji, alone, with a thousand difficulties, had got himself to his uncle in Hamadan. By coincidence his uncle died and since he had no other heir all his possessions went to Hajji. Because his uncle had been known in the bazaar as "Hajji", the title also went to the heir along with the shop. He had no relatives in this city. He made enquiries two or three times about his mother and sister who had become beggars in Karbala, but found no trace of them.

Hajji had got himself a wife two years ago, but he had not been lucky with her. For some time there had been continual fighting and quarrelling between the two of them. Hajji could tolerate everything

except the tongue-lashing of his wife, and in order to frighten her, he had become used to beating her frequently. Sometimes he regretted it, but in any case they would soon kiss and make up. The thing that irritated Hajji most was that they still had no children. Several times his friends advised him to get another wife, but Hajji wasn't a fool and he knew that taking another wife would add to his problems. He let the advice enter into one ear and come out of the other one. Furthermore, his wife was still young and pretty, and after several years they had become used to each other and, for better or worse, they somehow went through life together. And Hajji himself was still young. If God wanted it, he would be given children. That's why Hajji had no desire to divorce his wife, but at the same time, he couldn't get over his habit: he kept beating her and she became ever more obstinate. Especially since last night, the friction between them had become worse.

Throwing watermelon seeds into his mouth and spitting out the shells in front of him, he came out of the bazaar. He breathed the fresh spring air and remembered that now he had to go home: first there would be a scuffle, he would say one thing and she would answer back, and finally it would lead to his beating her. Then they would eat supper and glare at each other, and after that they would sleep. It was Thursday night, too, and he knew that tonight his wife had cooked sabzi pilau. These thoughts passed through his mind while he was looking this way and that way. He remembered his wife's words, "Go away you phoney Hajji! If you're a Hajji, how come your sister and mother have become something worse than beggars in Karbala? And me! I said no to Mashadi Hosein the moneylender when he asked for my hand only to get married to you, a good for nothing phoney Hajji!" He remembered this and kept biting his lip. It occurred to him that if he saw his wife there and then he would cut her stomach into pieces.

By this time he had reached Bayn ol'Nahrain Avenue. He looked at the willow trees which had come out fresh and green along the river. He thought it would be a good idea tomorrow, Friday, to go to Morad Bak Valley in the morning with several of his friends and their musical instruments and spend the day there. At least he wouldn't have to stay at home, which would be unpleasant for both him and his wife. He approached the alley which led to his house. Suddenly

he had the impression that he had glimpsed his wife walking next to him and then straight past him. She had walked past him and hadn't paid any attention to him. Yes, that was his wife all right. Not only because like most men Hajji recognized his wife under her *chador*, but also because his wife had a special sign so that among a thousand women Hajji could easily recognize her. This was his wife. He knew it from the white trim of her *chador*. There was no room for doubt. But how come she had left home again at this time of day and without asking for Hajji's permission? She hadn't bothered to come to the shop either to say that she needed something. Where was she going? Hajji walked faster and saw that, yes, this was definitely his wife. And even now she wasn't walking in the direction of home. Suddenly he became very angry. He couldn't control himself. He wanted to grab her and strangle her. Without intending to, he shouted her name, "Shahrbanu!"

The woman turned her face and walked faster, as if she were frightened. Hajji was furious. He couldn't see straight. He was burning with anger. Now, leaving aside the fact that his wife had left home without his permission, even when he called her, she wouldn't pay any attention to him! It struck a special nerve. He shouted again.

"Hey! Listen to me! Where are you going at this time of day? Stop and listen to me!"

The woman stopped and said aloud:

"Nosy parker, what's it to you? You mule, do you know what you're saying? Why do you bother someone else's wife? Now I'll show you. Help, help! See what this drunkard wants from me. Do you think the city has no laws? I'll turn you over to the police right now. Police!"

Entrance doors opened one by one. People gathered around them and the crowd grew continually larger. Hajji's face turned red. The veins on his forehead and neck stood out. He was well known in the bazaar. A crowd had built to look at them, and the woman, who had covered her face tightly with her *chador*, was shouting, "Police!"

Everything went dark and dim before Hajji's eyes. Then he took a step back, and then stepped forwards and slapped her hard on her covered face, and said, "Don't... don't change your voice. I knew from the very beginning that it was you. Tomorrow... Tomorrow I'll divorce you. Now you've taken to leaving the house without bothering to get permission? Do you want to disgrace me? Shameless woman,

now don't make me say more in front of these people. You people be my witness. I'm going to divorce this woman tomorrow – I've been suspicious of her for some time, but I always restrained myself. I was holding myself back, but now I've had all I can take. You be my witness, my wife has thrown away her honour. Tomorrow... you, tomorrow!..."

The woman, who was facing the people, said, "You cowards! Why don't you say anything? You let this good-for-nothing man lay hands on someone else's wife in the middle of the street? If Mashadi Hosein the moneylender were here he would show all of you. Even if I only live one more day I'll take such revenge that a dog would be better off. Isn't there anyone to tell this man to mind his own business? Who is he to associate with human beings? Go away. You'd better know who you're dealing with. Now I'm going to make you really regret it! Police!..."

Two or three mediators appeared and took Hajji aside. At this point a policeman arrived. The people stepped back. Hajji and the woman in the white-trimmed *chador* set out for police headquarters, along with two or three witnesses and mediators. On the way each of them stated his case to the policeman. People followed them to see how the business would turn out. Hajji, dripping with sweat, was walking next to the policeman in front of the people, and now he began to have doubts. He looked carefully and saw that the woman's buckled shoes and her stockings were different from his wife's. The identification she was showing the policeman was all right, too. She was the wife of Mashadi Hosein the moneylender, whom he knew. He discovered he had made a mistake, but he had realized it too late. Now he didn't know what would happen. When they reached police headquarters the people stayed outside. The policeman had Hajji and the woman enter a room in which two officers were sitting behind a table. The policeman saluted, described what had happened, then took himself off and went to stand by the door at the end of the room. The chief turned to Hajji and said:

"What is your name?"

"Your honour, I'm your servant. My name is Hajji Morad. Everyone knows me in the bazaar."

"What is your profession?"

"I'm a rice merchant. I have a store in the bazaar. I'll do whatever you say."

“Is it true that you were disrespectful to this lady and hit her in the street?”

“What can I say? I thought she was my wife.”

“Why?”

“Her *chador* has a white trim.”

“That’s very strange. Don’t you recognize your wife’s voice?”

Hajji heaved a sigh. “Oh, you don’t know what a plague my wife is. My wife imitates the sound of all the animals. When she comes from the public baths she talks in the voices of other women. She imitates everyone. I thought she wanted to trick me by changing her voice.”

“What impudence,” said the woman. “Officer, you’re a witness. He slapped me in the street, in front of a million people. Now all of a sudden he’s as meek as a mouse! What impudence! He thinks the city has no laws. If Mashadi Hosein knew about it he’d give you what you deserve. To his wife, your Honour!”

The officer said, “Very well, madam. We don’t need you any more. Please step outside while we settle Mr Morad’s account.”

Hajji said, “Oh God, I made a mistake, I didn’t know. It was an error. And I have a reputation to protect.”

The officer handed something in writing to the policeman. He took Hajji to another table. Hajji counted the bills for the fine with trembling hands and put them on the table. Then, accompanied by the policeman, he was taken outside in front of the police headquarters. People were standing in rows and whispering in each other’s ears. They lifted Hajji’s yellow cloak from his shoulders and a man with a whip in his hand came forwards and stood next to him. Hajji hung his head with shame and they whipped him fifty times in front of a crowd of spectators, but he didn’t move a muscle. When it was over he took his big silk handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the sweat from his forehead. He picked up his yellow cloak and threw it over his shoulders. Its folds dragged on the ground. With his head lowered, he set out for home, and tried to set his foot down more carefully to stifle the squeaking sound of his shoes. Two days later Hajji divorced his wife.