

# The Blind Owl

Sadeq Hedayat

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# The Blind Owl

Sadeq Hedayat



## *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), *Mazyar*, *Seh Qatreh Khun* (Three Drops of Blood), *Alaviyeh Khanom* (Mistress Alaviyeh), *Sayeh Roshan* (Chiaroscuro) *Vagh-vagh Sahab* (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 Amorزشesh*' (Seeking Absolution), '*Mohallel*' (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', 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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## The Blind Owl



# 1

**T**HERE ARE SORES which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker.

It is impossible to convey a just idea of the agony which this disease can inflict. In general, people are apt to relegate such inconceivable sufferings to the category of the incredible. Any mention of them in conversation or in writing is considered in the light of current beliefs, the individual's personal beliefs in particular, and tends to provoke a smile of incredulity and derision. The reason for this incomprehension is that mankind has not yet discovered a cure for this disease. Relief from it is to be found only in the oblivion brought about by wine and in the artificial sleep induced by opium and similar narcotics. Alas, the effects of such medicines are only temporary. After a certain point, instead of alleviating the pain, they only intensify it.

Will anyone ever penetrate the secret of this disease which transcends ordinary experience, this reverberation of the shadow of the mind, which manifests itself in a state of coma like that between death and resurrection, when one is neither asleep nor awake?

I propose to deal with only one case of this disease. It concerned me personally and it so shattered my entire being that I shall never be able to drive the thought of it out of my mind. The evil impression which it left has, to a degree that surpasses human understanding, poisoned my life for all time to come.

I said “poisoned”: I should have said that I have ever since borne, and will bear for ever, the brand mark of that cautery.

I shall try to set down what I can remember, what has remained in my mind of the sequence of events. I may perhaps be able to draw a general conclusion from it all – but no, that is too much to expect. I may hope to be believed by others or at least to convince myself; for, after all, it does not matter to me whether others believe me or not. My one fear is that tomorrow I may die without having come to know myself. In the course of my life I have discovered that a fearful abyss lies between me and other people and have realized that my best course is to remain silent and keep my thoughts to myself for as long as I can. If I have now made up my mind to write it is only in order to reveal myself to my shadow, that shadow which at this moment is stretched across the wall in the attitude of one devouring with insatiable appetite each word I write. It is for his sake that I wish to make the attempt. Who knows? We may perhaps come to know each other better. Ever since I broke the last ties which held me to the rest of mankind, my one desire has been to attain a better knowledge of myself.

Idle thoughts! Perhaps. Yet they torment me more savagely than any reality could do. Do not the rest of mankind who look like me, who appear to have the same needs and the same passion as I, exist only in order to cheat me? Are they not a mere handful of shadows which have come into existence only that they may mock and cheat me? Is not everything that I feel, see and think something entirely imaginary, something utterly different from reality?

I am writing only for my shadow, which is now stretched across the wall in the light of the lamp. I must make myself known to him.

## 2

**I**N THIS MEAN WORLD of wretchedness and misery I thought that for once a ray of sunlight had broken upon my life. Alas, it was not sunlight but a passing gleam, a falling star, which flashed upon me, in the form of a woman – or of an angel. In its light, in the course of a second, of a single moment, I beheld all the wretchedness of my existence and apprehended the glory and splendour of the star. After, that brightness disappeared again in the whirlpool of darkness in which it was bound inevitably to disappear. I was unable to retain that passing gleam.

It is three months – no, it is two months and four days – since I lost her from sight but the memory of those magic eyes, of the fatal radiance of those eyes, has remained with me at all times. How can I forget her, who is so intimately bound up with my own existence?

No, I shall never utter her name. For now, with her slender, ethereal, misty form, her great, shining, wondering eyes, in the depths of which my life has slowly and painfully burned and melted away, she no longer belongs to this mean, cruel world. No, I must not defile her name by contact with earthly things.

After she had gone I withdrew from the company of man, from the company of the stupid and the successful and, in order to forget, took refuge in wine and opium. My life passed, and still passes, within the four walls of my room. All my life has passed within four walls.

I used to work through the day, decorating the covers of pen cases. Or, rather, I spent on my trade of pen-case decorator the time that I did not devote to wine and opium. I had chosen this ludicrous trade of pen-case decorator only in order to stupefy myself, in order somehow or other to kill time.

I am fortunate in that the house where I live is situated beyond the edge of the city in a quiet district far from the noise and bustle of life. It is completely isolated and around it lie ruins. Only on the far side of the gully one can see a number of squat mud-brick houses which mark the extreme limit of the city. They must have been built by some fool or madman heaven knows how long ago. When I shut my eyes not only can I see every detail of their structure but I seem to feel the weight of them pressing on my shoulders. They are the sort of houses which one finds depicted only on the covers of ancient pen cases.

I am obliged to set all this down on paper in order to disentangle the various threads of my story. I am obliged to explain it all for the benefit of my shadow on the wall.

Yes, in the past only one consolation, and that a poor one, remained to me. Within the four walls of my room I painted my pictures on the pen cases and thereby, thanks to this ludicrous occupation of mine, managed to get through the day. But when once I had seen those two eyes, once I had seen her, activity of any sort lost all meaning, all content, all value for me.

I would mention a strange, an incredible thing. For some reason unknown to me the subject of all my painting was from the very beginning one and the same. It consisted always of a cypress tree at the foot of which was squatting a bent old man like an Indian fakir. He had a long cloak wrapped about him and wore a turban on his head. The index finger of his left hand

was pressed to his lips in a gesture of surprise. Before him stood a girl in a long black dress, leaning towards him and offering him a flower of morning glory. Between them ran a little stream. Had I seen the subject of this picture at some time in the past or had it been revealed to me in a dream? I do not know. What I do know is that whenever I sat down to paint I reproduced the same design, the same subject. My hand independently of my will always depicted the same scene. Strangest of all, I found customers for these paintings of mine. I even dispatched some of my pen-case covers to India through the intermediary of my paternal uncle, who used to sell them and remit the money to me.

Somehow I always felt this subject to be remote and, at the same time, curiously familiar to me. I don't remember very well... It occurs to me that I once said to myself that I must write down what I remember of all this – but that happened much later and has nothing to do with the subject of my painting. Moreover, one consequence of this experience was that I gave up painting altogether. That was two months, or, rather exactly, two months and four days ago.

It was the thirteenth day of Nouruz.\* Everyone had gone out to the country. I had shut the window of my room in order to be able to concentrate on my painting. It was not long before sunset and I was working away when suddenly the door opened and my uncle came into the room. That is, he said he was my uncle. I had never seen my uncle in my life, for he had been abroad ever since his early youth. I seem to remember that he was a sea captain. I imagined he might have some business matter to discuss with me, since I understood that he was interested in commerce as well. At all events my uncle was a

bent old man with an Indian turban on his head and a ragged yellow cloak on his back; his face was partly concealed by a scarf wrapped around his neck; his shirt was open and revealed a hairy chest. It would have been possible to count the hairs of the sparse beard protruding from under the scarf which muffled his neck. His eyelids were red and sore and he had a harelip. He resembled me in a remote, comical way like a reflection in a distorting mirror. I had always pictured my father something like this. On entering the room he walked straight across to the opposite wall and squatted on the floor. It occurred to me that I ought to offer him some refreshment in honour of his arrival. I lit the lamp and went into the little dark closet which opens off my room. I searched every corner in the hope of finding something suitable to offer him, although I knew there was nothing of the sort in the house – I had no opium or drink left. Suddenly my eye lighted on the topmost of the shelves on the wall. It was as though I had had a flash of inspiration. On the shelf stood a bottle of old wine which had been left me by my parents. I seem to remember hearing that it had been laid down on the occasion of my birth. There it was on the top shelf. I had never so much as given it a thought and had quite forgotten there was such a thing in the house. To reach the shelf I got up onto a stool which happened to be there. As I reached towards the bottle, I chanced to look out through the ventilation hole above the shelf. On the open ground outside my room I saw a bent old man sitting at the foot of a cypress tree with a young girl – no, an angel from heaven – standing before him. She was leaning forwards and with her right hand was offering him a blue flower of morning glory. The old man was biting the nail of the index finger on his left hand.

The girl was directly opposite me but she appeared to be quite unaware of her surroundings. She was gazing straight ahead without looking at anything in particular. She wore on her lips a vague, involuntary smile as though she was thinking of someone who was absent. It was then that I first beheld those frightening, magic eyes, those eyes which seemed to express a bitter reproach to mankind, with their look of anxiety and wonder, of menace and promise – and the current of my existence was drawn towards those shining eyes charged with manifold significance and sank into their depths. That magnetic mirror drew my entire being towards it with inconceivable force. They were slanting, Turkoman eyes of supernatural, intoxicating radiance which at once frightened and attracted, as though they had looked upon terrible, transcendental things which it was given to no one but her to see. Her cheekbones were prominent and her forehead high. Her eyebrows were slender and met in the middle. Her lips were full and half-open as though they had broken away only a moment before from a long, passionate kiss and were not yet sated. Her face, pale as the moon, was framed in the mass of her black, dishevelled hair and one strand clung to her temple. The fineness of her limbs and the ethereal unconstraint of her movements marked her as one who was not fated to live long in this world. No one but a Hindu temple dancer could have possessed her harmonious grace of movement.

Her air of mingled gaiety and sadness set her apart from ordinary mankind. Her beauty was extraordinary. She reminded me of a vision seen in an opium sleep. She aroused in me a heat of passion like that which is kindled by the mandrake root. It seemed to me that as I gazed at her long slender form, with its harmonious lines of shoulder, arm, breasts, waist, buttocks and

legs, that she had been torn from her husband's embrace, that she was like the female mandrake which has been plucked from the arms of its mate.

She was wearing a black pleated dress which clung tightly to her body. Gazing at her, I was certain that she wished to leap across the stream which separated her from the old man but that she was unable to do so. All at once the old man burst into laughter. It was a hollow, grating laugh, of a quality to make the hairs of one's body stand on end; a harsh, sinister, mocking laugh. And yet the expression of his face did not change. It was as though the laughter was echoing from somewhere deep within his body.

In terror I sprang down from the stool with the bottle in my hand. I was trembling, in a state of mingled horror and delight such as might have been produced by some delicious, fearful dream. I set the bottle of wine down on the floor and held my head in my hands. How many minutes, how many hours I remained thus, I do not know. When I came to myself I picked up the bottle and went back into my room. My uncle had gone and had left the room door agape like the mouth of a dead man. The sound of the old man's hollow laughter was still echoing in my ears.

It was growing dark. The lamp was burning smokily. I could still feel the aftermath of the delicious, horrible fit of trembling which I had experienced. From that moment the course of my life had changed. With one glance, that angel of heaven, that ethereal girl, had left on me the imprint of her being, more deeply marked than the mind of man can conceive.

At that moment I was in a state of trance. It seemed to me that I had long known her name. The radiance of her eyes, her