

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editors:

I have read *Literature and Society in Iran* with great interest and pleasure and would like to congratulate the Journal, the guest editor, and the contributors on providing this meaningful forum for the study of Persian literature in general and of Persian fiction in particular. As you know, I have spent the better part of the last decade interpreting the works of Sadeq Hedayat, especially *The Blind Owl*. I am delighted, therefore, to learn that Michael Beard is completing a study of Western influences on the novella. Beard's *At the Sign of the Owl* is exactly what I had hoped someone would write. I myself have just completed *The Fiction of Sadeq Hedayat: Buddhist Motifs* dealing with Eastern influences. This latter examines all the fictional works chronologically and treats *The Blind Owl* as a special case.

A further purpose of this letter is to add some information to Beard's analysis of a scene from *The Blind Owl* (see pages 59 and 67 in "The Hierarchy of the Arts in *Buf-e Kur*," *Iranian Studies*, Vol. XV, nos. 1-4, 1982, pp. 53-67). This information, derived from my analysis of *The Blind Owl* in the context of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, may explain the black color of the flower offered to the girl, but it leaves the species of the flower in doubt.

As Beard correctly points out, the flower motif appears in two major scenes and is then repeated throughout. One scene shows the picture that the narrator paints on pen-case covers and sends to India for profit; the other is the haunting scene in which the painter encounters the ethereal being. A close examination of the scenes reveals that only the flower in the haunting scene is described as black. The color of the other flower is unknown.

I have shown elsewhere (see "The Message of Hedayat," *Studies in Islam*, Vol. XVII, January 1980, pp. 30-56) that two major traditions, Indian and Tibetan, contribute to the structural and thematic makeup of *The Blind Owl*. It is the Tibetan tradition that is of significance here.

*The Tibetan Book of the Dead* presents a scene in which the Lord of Death receives and judges the souls who arrive in the underworld. Each soul carries the visible reward of his past deeds in the form of black or white pebbles. Those souls who have worked for the good of mankind carry white pebbles; they are readily accepted by the Lord of Death and are saved. Those souls carry black pebbles who, preoccupied with the phenomenal world, have not been able to sever their relation with Karma; they are hurled into the abyss of re-birth. The River of Forgetfulness carries these doomed souls to their regeneration in the Place of the Wombs.

This scene in *The Blind Owl*, like many other scenes in the novella, derives from a Tibetan prototype. The ethereal being is the painter's soul or double, black lilies are black pebbles--a visible sign of rejection--and the Indian Yogi is the Lord of Death. If we assume that the colorless flower on the pencase covers represents the painter's hoped-for reward, it is the black flower that shatters that hope. While on the earthplane, knowingly or otherwise, the painter had preoccupied himself with worldly gains. Now, on the Judgment Day, his soul carries a cursed black flower to the old Indian Yogi. The sight of the black flower stuns the painter--he was expecting something else. He realizes in a flash that he is doomed and that he can do nothing but wait and endure.

The theme of *The Blind Owl*, like the theme of the Indian and Tibetan traditions on which it draws, is freedom. The flower's color symbolically relates the painter's previous, blind adherence to dogma and ritual to his present state of helplessness and doom. The blackness of the flower, in other words, opens the pencase-cover painter's eyes to new realities. It changes an uncritical painter of useless objects into an advocate of human rights.

The writing of *The Blind Owl* affected Hedayat personally. In India in 1937, Hedayat, like the pencase-cover painter in his story, recognized his own potential as a

writer. He gave up writing collections of uncritical stories like *Chiarascuro* and began to write stories like *The Water of Life*, *Haji Aqa* and *The Pearl Cannon*. *The Blind Owl* was the catalyst that hastened the change of a mild social critic into a revolutionary and reformist writer.

It is not my intention here to analyze either *The Blind Owl* or this scene. It is obvious, however, that the influence of ancient Indian thought on the life and works of Hedayat is profound. I would like, therefore, in this brief note to underscore the importance of these traditions in Hedayat studies and to call for a better and more concerted treatment of this important writer and his craft.

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To the Editors:

There are few occasions when anything of significance can be said without ambivalence. The retirement of Ali Banuazizi as Editor of "our" journal is one of them. Ali labored--and that captures precisely the nature of his unselfish service--with great devotion for many years to make *Iranian Studies* a model of scholarly integrity. In the face of inordinate political and financial obstacles and even personal inclination, he imposed the highest ethical and intellectual standards on himself as Editor and on the journal as well. As a result, all of us who count ourselves students of Iran were elevated.

It is in no small measure because of the devotion of scholarly integrity which he expended over many years, that there is still a community of "Iranian" scholars. That we have been able to maintain that community throughout the revolution is testimony of how soundly that community has been established. And, hopefully, it is through participation in that community that we and future scholars of Iran will be able to make additional contributions toward understanding post-revolutionary Iran.