

A Comparative Post-Colonial Approach to Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*

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**Abstract:** In her article, "A Comparative Post-Colonial Approach to Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*," Yasamine C. Coulter discusses post-colonial theories of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Jalal ale Ahmad, and relates them to the major themes of Hedayat's novel. For the most part, the fact that the text's narrator is disillusioned with his country's traditional way of life makes him an outsider within his own society. However, he fails to find peace in his other, chosen, mode of being and this implies that he is unable to fully identify with Western traditions, either. It is at this point of the text that Coulter draws a parallel between the narrator's distress and Sadegh Hedayat's personal angst, both of which stem from an inability to reconcile Western and Eastern influences and modes of existence and culture. Moreover, the narrator's inability to completely accept or disregard the notion of metaphysics is a macrocosmic manifestation of his cultural dilemma. Coulter concludes her argumentation with a discussion of how one of perhaps the most important fault lines of post-colonial discourse is very real in present-day Iran, precisely because Iranians still do not agree on how to reclaim their cultural past and assert their own identity in the real context of Western cultural omnipresence.

**Yasamine C. COULTER**

### **A Comparative Post-Colonial Approach to Hedayat's *The Blind Owl***

Many critics believe that Sadegh Hedayat's European education had a profound influence on his work. His masterpiece, *The Blind Owl*, employs many aspects of Western literary tradition; its genre, itself, exemplifies this tradition, for it was the first novel to be written by an Iranian writer. In the context of conventional Persian literature, *The Blind Owl* was considered innovative, an experimental piece of fiction in Iran. This novel was revolutionary, in that it introduced what one might consider to be a Derridean "rupture" in traditional Persian literary history, but, despite its "Westernness," it is nevertheless deeply rooted in Iranian social issues.

*The Blind Owl* centers about an individual who falls deeper and deeper into the abyss of uncertainty and madness. The narrator poses as a Westernised Easterner, and scorns his country's customs, which he claims are stagnant in the face of modernity. This self-denigration echoes Edward Said's assertion in *Orientalism* (1978) that the "Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing" (325). Thus, the narrator embodies the condition of a typical post-colonial subject. He does not, however, find peace of mind in Western values; he is unable, for example, to cure his malaise through the writing of a European-style, surrealistic novel. Furthermore, he fails to unite traditional values with modern ones, because ultimate reconciliation appears to be unattainable. On a macrocosmic level, this is implied by the narrator's uncertainty pertaining to metaphysics (Manijeh Mannani, Lecture, University of Alberta, 1998). On a microcosmic level, though, his lack of faith in a "higher being" shakes the foundations of the particular literary and religious traditions in Iran; consequently, he is incapable of identifying with his native culture. The narrator's failure to resolve the question of metaphysics in *The Blind Owl* reveals that he is caught between both tradition and modernity -- which are represented by the East and the West, respectively -- and fails to bridge the two together.

I have taken a comparative cultural studies approach to *The Blind Owl* for three reasons: first, this type of analysis has given me the freedom to not only discuss literary evaluations of the text, but also to incorporate political, social and psychological insights; by situating the novel in its historical context, I have drawn a parallel between issues raised in the novel and Iran's present-day political situation. Next, through such an approach, I have conducted a study of both canonised and non-canonised (Iranian) "post-colonial" theories, and have found that such notions as "malaise" and "double-consciousness" are the principal concepts discussed in both cases, although under different terminology. It is always fascinating for the comparatist to discover such similarities. Finally, I hope to shed light on, and bring awareness to, a remarkable, but somewhat "marginalised" novel, coming from a rich, yet "marginalised," literature -- Persian literature.

Said's concept of Orientalism can be compared to the "colonial attitude" which, today, bears negative connotations. Orientalism is "dealing with [the Orient] by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism [is] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). The "East," or "Orient," being the entity of Islamic countries which are conveyed as "inferior" by, and to, their Western counterparts, has expressed, in many ways, an outburst of post-colonial sentiments relating to this very Western domination. Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* certainly embodies, although underlyingly, a literary post-colonial reaction to the "Orientalizing" of Iran. Said also points out that "Orientalism [is] a discourse..." (3; emphasis mine) commensurate with Foucault's notion of the word. Orientalism, therefore, imparts a certain power inherent to the knowledge that Westerners proclaim(ed) to have when they institutionalise(d) the East. They claim(ed) to understand Eastern behaviour better than Easterners. This "knowledge" and capacity to classify the East is what gives/gave them authority. Said deals with a large body of European literary works which represent(ed) the Orient, and which create(d) a series of dichotomies like us/worthy versus them/unworthy, referring to the West and the East, respectively. These dualities have therefore left a bitter taste in the Easterner's mouth (information on Edward Said and his work is available at <<http://online.anu.edu.au/english/said.html>> [inactive]).

The narrator in *The Blind Owl* takes on many characteristics of the Orientalist, although he is a native Iranian. These conflicting aspects of his identity present a typical post-colonial undertone throughout the novel, because, in many ways, the narrator appears to be a post-colonial subject who is victimised by foreign ideas, although he is not aware of this; he expresses his intellectual superiority by imposing his condescending, and seemingly Western, views on Iranian traditions, but this superiority complex, which runs parallel to an Orientalist's ego, also outcasts him, since he has "discovered that a fearful abyss lies between [him] and other people..." (Hedayat 2). He is, therefore, neither a true Westerner, nor a true Easterner. The narrator is inflicted with what he calls a "disease" which is best described as his above inability to fit into society. It is this very illness, which has never been witnessed in the people around him, that marks him as insane. His madness is what sets him apart from society: "Any mention of [it] in conversation or in writing is considered in the light of current beliefs...and tends to provoke a smile of incredulity and derision" (Hedayat 1). He conveys to his readers that voicing his thoughts, which lie outside of "current beliefs," is unacceptable. Most people reject him, because his so-called disease is unfathomable and, thus, "incredulous." He is scorned, for he is distanced from the norm.

Although the narrator, himself, does not directly tell the reader that he is a post-colonial subject, he nevertheless portrays all of the "symptoms" of one such individual; thus, he is "mad". Hedayat lived during a very historically significant period of time in Iran, during the reign of Reza Shah, and, although the country was never formally colonised, two imperial powers -- the British and the Russians -- nevertheless had much economic control over it. Meanwhile, the French were at the height of their intellectual reign, and many Iranians were, as a result, influenced by, and educated in, France. Thus, it is reasonable to assert that Iran was "intellectually colonised." Moreover, Reza Shah's quest for modernity, as well as his rebellion against the clergy, led him to ban the wearing of the hejab. Furthermore, he introduced the Western education system in Iran (see <<http://www.cyberiran.com/history/>>). He also secularised Iranian society, so that it might more closely resemble a Western one. Thus, it seems likely that, because Hedayat was at the height of his career during this period of European imperialism in Iran, his exposure to both Western and Eastern cultures left him torn between two worlds. *The Blind Owl* could very well be a manifestation of his entailing frustrations. The narrator's "malaise" is an indirect and implicit reflection of the effects of intellectual colonisation of the "natives" of a colonised nation, one of whom was Hedayat (for information on Sadegh Hedayat and his works, see <[www.geocities.com/Paris/Tower/2943/index.html](http://www.geocities.com/Paris/Tower/2943/index.html)>).

Because the narrator is ostracised, he writes for his shadow which is incapable of judging him: "I am writing only for my shadow... I must make myself known to him" (Hedayat 3). He is mad because he has severed "...the last ties which held [him] to the rest of mankind," (Hedayat 2) and he can no longer lead an ordinary life; that is, he cannot bring himself to act like his fellow countrymen. By writing in the form of the novel, rather than in traditional poetry or short prose, the narrator is able to convey his concerns. It is only through an innovative and, thus, modern medium, in the context of his native literary tradition, that he can fully express his post-colonial disease. He states, "I refuse to hide real feelings behind a fanciful veil of 'love,' 'fondness' and such like theological terms: I have no taste for literary *huzvareh*" (Hedayat 72). It is apparent here that the narrator is accusing traditional Persian literature of being insincere. The excessive ornamentation and pretentious eloquence of this literature fail to convey the true sentiments of mankind, because they follow a restrictive, pre-formatted pattern of writing which eliminates free-expression. True feelings are indirectly monitored and censored through the customary, obligatory format of literary composition.

Having chosen to write in the form of a novel, which is a part of Western literary tradition, the narrator reveals that he is very much Westernised. The post-colonial theoretician, Frantz Fanon, describes, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), this same occurrence, when the colonised subject strives to adhere to Western literary principles: "In the first phase [of the evolution of a native writer], the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power. His writings correspond point by point with those of his opposite numbers in the mother country. His inspiration is European and we can easily link up these works with definite trends in

the literature of the mother country" (178-79). In this sense, the fact that the narrator in *The Blind Owl* writes according to Western literary tradition indicates that his "inspiration is European." He seems to have "assimilated that culture" and looks down upon his native one (for information of Frantz Fanon and his work, see <<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/fanon.htm>>). Because the narrator adheres to Western literary practises, he can no longer fully identify with native literary ones and, by extension, with his own society. In the "General Characteristics of Contemporary Literature" (1982) Iranian social critic Jalal ale Ahmad claims that whilst Persian writers may adopt Western literary traditions, they are nevertheless plagued by *gharbzadegi*, or "Weststruckness," which is analogous to the "post-colonial syndrome": "a present-day writer or poet pays more attention to the West than to the literary tradition in his or her own mother tongue. It is precisely this level of influence that leads to *gharbzadegi*: western writing techniques, viewing things with western eyes, the selection of western literary form. All of these things, at the same time as they indicate a new birth in Persian literature, have engendered a feeling of alienation" (97).

Thus, when the narrator of *The Blind Owl* employs Western writing techniques, he intensifies his "feeling of alienation" and distances himself further from his native traditions. Thus, he becomes the very portrait of the Orientalist. As such, he becomes more and more insane. The act of writing a novel conveys the narrator's inability to format his "frustrated aspirations" in traditional Persian literature. Consequently, Western paradigms seem to suit his literary needs more adequately. However, the question that should be asked is: "Would the narrator have such needs if his country had not been intellectually colonised?" Because the author had been exposed to two very different literary canons, he conveys, through the narrator, a post-colonial malaise -- a malaise which is *complex*, since it presents a battle between two cultural perspectives (for a comprehensive look at various post-colonial writers and theories, see <<http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Contents.html#Authors>>).

The nameless narrator thus criticises those who have only an Eastern perspective, and makes a point of distinguishing himself from them, since he believes that he has transcended his fellow citizens' simple way of life: "All [their] buffoonery left me completely cold" (Hedayat 97). The narrator writes a story in which he portrays the people around him and their culture in a derogatory manner. "[He] ha[s] no use ... [for] the notions of the rabble ...What need ha[s] [he] of their nonsense and lies?" (Hedayat 88). He writes his thoughts, in order to challenge his shadow which is a metaphor for the burden of religious and literary traditions that weigh heavily upon him. The narrator, then, by expressing his troubles in words, is desperately seeking solace and, thus, a remedy for his disease: one which stems from the effects of intellectual colonisation, on a microcosmic level, and from being fully conscious of metaphysical uncertainty, on a macrocosmic level.

According to the narrator, he cannot voice his concerns to ordinary people, in an ordinary manner, because their spiritual outlets are limited to traditional patterns of thought. It is through the discourse of his novel that he assumes authority over his people, for he has transcended and, consequently, rejected the conventional Persian literary forms, which have not the means to convey his sentiments. By extension, one can relate the inadequacy of traditional literature in depicting the narrator's true sentiments to the inadequacy of traditional religion in answering his ontological doubts: "A story is only an outlet for frustrated aspirations, for aspirations which the story-teller conceives in accordance with a limited stock of spiritual resources inherited from previous generations" (Hedayat 67). He asserts that his country's "spiritual resources" are stagnant and have failed to develop over time. Citations, like the one above, maintain the Orientalist claim and, thus, the narrator's claim, that the East has not evolved as has the West. In his treatise, Said declares this conclusion: "No Semite advanced in time beyond the development of a 'classical' period; no Semite could ever shake loose the pastoral, desert environment of his tent and tribe. Every manifestation of actual 'Semitic' life could be, and ought to be, referred back to the primitive explanatory category of 'the Semitic'" (234). Orientals, because they supposedly adhere to their "classical" ideals, are assumed to be non-modernised peoples; thus, they are made to appear "primitive" and uncivilised, in comparison to Occidentals. In the context of Orientalist discourse, then, it is reasonable to assume that the definition of modernity must be, *Those*

*practices of Western society that differ from their Eastern counterparts, and are, as a result, undoubtedly superior.* "Modernity" seems to be a measure of how much a society has become Westernised. The colonial class, having different, and assumingly "better," traditions than the colonised people, tends to dominate over the latter class, whose culture seems unrefined and "savage" and, thus, primitive. The narrator in *The Blind Owl*, because he voices his disgust for his fellow Iranians, therefore insinuates that he is a "modern" Iranian, and it is evident that he is an Easterner who inadvertently strives to be like a Westerner, even though he never describes such a role model; his longing to assimilate into a foreign culture, through the rejection of his own, follows the pattern of the post-colonial subject in Fanon's aforementioned "first phase." The narrator's behaviour parallels that of a colonised subject who desires to prove his worth by mimicking the colonial class.

Since the narrator in *The Blind Owl* takes on an Orientalist façade, he constantly alludes to the culture and traditions of his people as stagnant: "For thousands of years people have been saying the same words, performing the same sexual act, vexing themselves with the same childish worries" (67). M.I. Ghotbi, in *This is The Blind Owl* (1934), discusses how the narrator also repeats, throughout the novel, the numbers two and four, in an effort to convey that civilisation arose about two-thousand and four-hundred years ago (Ghotbi 67). The narrator says, for example, "It is three months- no, it is two months and four days-since I lost her [the ethereal girl] from sight" (Hedayat 4; emphasis mine). Repetition of this same allusion to the beginning of civilisation connotes a vicious circle of traditions that do not seem to have evolved, for "[a]n incident of yesterday may... be less significant, less recent than something that happened a thousand years ago" (Hedayat 49). Orientals, then, according to Said, are depicted as being "enchained by race [and] history" (147), and the narrator in *The Blind Owl* emphasises this very concept. The theme of ancient mysticism in Persia is reflected in the "ethereal girl" who appears at the beginning of the novel. She represents tradition, in that she is the incarnation of divinity which the Sufis claimed to have encountered. The words that the narrator uses to describe the ethereal girl are very mystical, themselves: "In 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 the wretchedness of my existence and apprehended the glory and splendour of the star" (Hedayat 4).

This passage describes a very characteristic representation of what might seem like a Sufi's encounter with the divine. The "passing gleam" which "flashes" upon the narrator conveys one such instantaneous and spontaneous encounter. The narrator alludes to the fact that ancient tradition is still prevalent in present times, because, as an individual living in the present, he encounters a character from the past. He confuses the past with the present, as though they were the same entity, and his life, therefore, appears to be devoid of chronological time. This confusion of time reflects an evolution that his society apparently failed to undergo, for what appears in the present seems quite unchanged from the past (for information of Sufism, see <<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jrcole/sufi.htm>>).

In an article entitled "A Systemic Approach to Modern Persian Prose Fiction," Nasrin Rahimieh points out that "by destroying 'the ethereal girl' [the narrator] is able to temporarily break out of the pattern of mystic love and, by extension, that of traditional Persian literature" (16). Once she dies, the narrator asks himself, "What means had I of creating a masterpiece?" (Hedayat 23) for the act of proclaiming a work of writing as a "masterpiece" is one that must be taken by his fellow citizens who, within the limited scope of their realm, must surely make their judgement while keeping in mind the conventions of traditional literature. Because his writing steps outside of these boundaries, he will never be considered to be a great writer in Iran. This last assertion parallels what Said, in *Orientalism*, claims about discourse: each new piece of writing validates itself by referencing and mimicking past works. In following the conventions and styles of what has already been written to *prove* that his work is worthy, one eventually finds himself locked in a literary tradition -- a cycle which is difficult to break. However, in breaking with tradition, the narrator alienates himself from the onset.



In elaborating Rahimieh's above statement, it seems that the narrator attempts, through the dismemberment of the girl, to move into modernity, by "destroying" all Persian literary traditions. "Mystic love" can be interpreted as Platonic, or metaphysical, love and, from here, one can infer the affinity to religious love, since these are all types of love on an "unearthly" dimension. Therefore, in killing the "ethereal girl," one recognises the narrator trying to sever any ties he might have had with God, Islam, or mysticism. By cutting himself off from a traditional past, then, the narrator becomes more and more insane, because he must now wander in unfamiliar territory. He also fears persecution for his crime. This paranoia is reflected through his suspicion of the police, whom he believes will expose both his dismembering of a woman, on a more concrete level, and his defiance of tradition, on another, more abstract level. Ironically, the narrator is never punished by the police, since he alludes to them as men from the "Kingdom of Rey," an onomastic reference to the ancient city. Because the narrator has attempted to progress into modernity by leaving behind tradition, he is no longer eligible to be punished by a system that he no longer supports and which no longer applies to him.

Although the narrator rejects tradition -- be it traditional literature, mysticism or religion -- he does not find an alternative *mode of being* that eases his mind. He does not commit suicide, because his "fear of death" lies in the fact that he does not want "the atoms of [his] body ... to make up the bodies of rabble-men" (Hedayat 99). He cringes at the thought of himself decomposing, only to be recycled into future generations, wherein he will be a part of the past that is lived in the present. However, his misery stems, in part, from his rejection of tradition which he cannot completely shake off. He is torn between the past and modernity, and oscillates between these two, always unable to find direction in his life. The narrator's ultimate concern -- a concern which prevents him from moving into a new or other realm -- is the question of God's existence. The narrator demeans the tradition of Islam, and religion, itself: "As for mosques, the muezzin's call to prayer, the ceremonial washing of the body and rinsing of the mouth, not to mention the pious practice of bobbing up and down in honour of a high and mighty Being, the omnipotent Lord of all things, with whom it was impossible to have a chat except in the Arabic language these things left me completely cold" (Hedayat 88).

Although to be "left completely cold" implies that he is dumbfounded by his country's blind faith in religious customs, it also infers that the question of God paralyses him, and keeps him frozen in an anxious trance out of which he cannot emerge. Likewise, he claims that his suffering will end, only once he "make[s] plain all the problems of philosophy and the riddles of theology ... [so that] the mysteries and secrets would no longer ... exist[t]..." (Hedayat 14). Thus, he is undoubtedly vexed by ontological questions. The narrator's speculation about the existence of a metaphysical being reflects his inability to completely shake off tradition. Metaphysical uncertainty is the larger scope of his disease of which he is unable to be rid. It is from this disease that his conflicts with traditional literature and customs branch off: he appears to be rooted in tradition by the mere fact that he is uncertain about the Divine. The concept of divinity nonetheless finds its roots in mysticism and, later, in organised religion. He still adheres somewhat, by refusing to completely dismiss the concept of metaphysics, to the God in which his civilisation has faithfully believed for thousands of years, that is, to his "ancestral superstitions and ... fear of the dark" (Hedayat 110). Since it is a generally accepted fact that religious tradition is the basis for all traditions, then the narrator's inability to uproot himself entirely from religious tradition keeps him from progressing, successfully, beyond any kind of tradition.

Thus, he is doubly alienated. On the one hand, he distances himself from his native culture by posing as an Orientalist. On the other hand, he cannot fully immerse himself in modernity, because he remains rooted in ancient tradition. Meanwhile, he is alone in his confusion, and unable to find anyone in the same predicament. Being caught in the middle of the East/West duality, he is the very embodiment of the "double consciousness." Because the narrator appears to be unique in his endeavours to surpass traditional boundaries, those around him cast him away, labelling him as insane: "The reason for [their] 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 ... opium" (Hedayat 1).

The narrator exposes society as repulsively stagnant. His madness ostracises him, making him an outsider looking in, merely because he proposes foreign ideas. In this sense, he is very much like the Orientalist, who judges the East from the West's viewpoint wherein there is a lack of traditional reform in the Orient. Therefore, the East seems to be, in reference to the aforementioned worthy/unworthy duality, unworthy, according to the narrator. He acts as though he were a member of the colonial class and, yet, his suffering, which results, in part, from his never-ending contemplation of two polar opposites -- the existence or non-existence of metaphysics -- parallels the suffering of the post-colonial subject who has been exposed to another set of binary opposites: Eastern thought, and its antithesis; Western thought. The narrator cannot find solace in either culture. Orientalist discourse claims that "the difference between East and West is between modernity and ancient tradition" (Said 269). The narrator in *The Blind Owl* is caught between this very dichotomy, but ultimately, he does not find a solution to his dilemma. In a more subtle reading, one might presume that this lack of resolution implies a universal predicament -- that *enfin*, both geographical entities are plagued by the same disease that lacks an antidote. Neither the West (modernity) nor the East (ancient tradition) is capable of knowing Truth. Thus, the question of God, as an indecisive truth claim, remains unanswered by both the West and the East.

This lack of resolution pertains to the Orient *and* the Occident. From here, it can be inferred that, although it was not necessarily Hedayat's intent to deconstruct Western authority in the novel, today, one can imagine such an interpretation; in post-modernity, claims of truth and certainty, as in the assertion of God, are no longer verifiable and remain unresolved. Since the West is uncertain about metaphysics in much the same way as is the East, it is only reasonable to assume that both parties are equally in the dark; thus, the West has no "right" to dominate the East. The concept of universal metaphysical uncertainty theoretically "humbles" the West and places it on the same level as the East.

The narrator, because he is unfamiliar with post-colonial theory, inadvertently decenters the authority of the coloniser by acknowledging the universal inability to solve the riddle of metaphysics. It is here that post-colonialism merges with post-modernism. Because both parties have no concrete answers to the question of metaphysics, it becomes evident that no assertion can be proven to be either true or false. No one party is, any longer, better-off, or more knowledgeable, than another. The narrator desires very much to break out of tradition and solve the problem of metaphysics, and to do this, he seems to need support, rather than the discouragement he receives from those around him, who are blinded by religion and who cannot fathom his angst, for the "Muslims, like most other former colonial peoples, [appear to be] incapable of telling the truth or even seeing it ... they are addicted to mythology..." (Hedayat 318). The narrator in *The Blind Owl*, then, like an Orientalist, reveals that his fellow citizens are deeply attached to what he believes is the mythology of Islam. He states, "I felt that religion, faith, belief were feeble, childish things of which the best that could be said was that they provided a kind of recreation for the healthy, successful people" (Hedayat 89). He alludes rhetorically to numerous Moslem traditions, throughout the novel. He calls, for example, the cutting-off of fingers as punishment for crimes a "barbarous" law. Thus, the narrator evokes images from pre-Islamic times to convey a "pure," uncorrupted-by-Islam tradition in Iran, in order to disclose his disapproval of the religion. He describes, at many instances, ancient items, such as a "glazed jar" that was decorated by an "ancient painter," and he confuses the modern coins, called *krans* and *abbasis*, with their ancient counterparts, called *direms* and *peshiz*. The narrator seems to be searching for his roots, and, as a spokesperson for his author, he is, perhaps, conveying a need to understand his collective past, and to seek, as would the typical post-colonial subject, his "pure" cultural identity. In this case, the narrator evokes pre-Islamic images, which not only inevitably presuppose the Western influences that trouble him, but also the Moslem ones, which were introduced by the Arabs. Such pre-Islamic allusions reflect Hedayat's personal quest for a wholly Persian cultural identity, as discussed in Ehsan Yarshater's preface to *Sadegh Hedayat: An Anthology* (1979): "A key element of Hedayat's tormented feelings is his strong, if distorted, sense of nationalism. His attraction to the study of Middle Persian Zoroastrian literature was no doubt



motivated by his belief in ancient Persian virtues and a desire to catch glimpses of a past unsullied by the corruption and debasement of alien influences" (viii). The narrator also alludes to a fragment of Omar Khayyam's poetry -- poetry which Hedayat adored: "Since life passes, whether sweet or bitter,/ Since the soul must pass the lips, whether in Nishapur or in Balkh,/ Drink wine, for after you and I are gone many a moon/ Will pass from old to new, from new to old" (Hedayat 48).

Michael Beard, in his critique entitled *Hedayat's Blind Owl as a Western Novel* (1990) explains that "[Omar Khayyam] ... unveiled an emptiness behind the pieties of mystical poetry, [and was] the only Persian poet Hedayat describe[d] with unmixed admiration" (72). Thus, like Hedayat, the narrator is affirming an agreement with Khayyam's need to break-out of mystical Islamic poetry, whose themes were introduced by Arab Moslems and, thus, by "alien influences," when he cites the above verses. Consequently, he appears to be searching for an "unsullied" Persian cultural identity, in an attempt to reclaim the past "virtues" which might possibly cure his post-colonial syndrome. He takes part in a what Fanon would call a "passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era ... to renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of [his] people ... some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates [him] both in regard to [himself] and in regard to others" (169-70). This is what Fanon describes as the "second phase," when "the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is ... but often too [his research] is symptomatic of a period of distress and difficulty, where death is experienced and disgust too" (Fanon 179). Within *The Blind Owl*, then, the narrator's search for a glorious past reflects the fact that he is "disturbed"; he hopes to find renewed hopes in reclaiming that "colonial spring of life." However, this "passionate research" for a "splendid era" is, of course, a myth, for one cannot hope to find a "pure" identity within the ethnically heterogeneous nature of civilisation. The narrator in *The Blind Owl*, because he is searching for an "essential" cultural heritage, is therefore still vexed by his angst. Once again, he finds that he cannot identify with tradition (for information of Zoroastrianism, see <<http://www.ozemail.com.au/~zarathus/histar33.html>> [inactive]).

Beard then compares the narrator's use of shadow in the novel with Khayyam's Platonic imagery (Plato's cave). He states, "if we emphasise the shadows, the point is simply the illusory nature of human life" (Beard 74). In other words, the narrator's use of shadow imagery in *The Blind Owl* -- connoting the deeply ingrained sense of tradition that weighs heavily upon his conscience -- conveys the burden of customs and religious practices which are shielded behind a veil of unverified faith. This veil of faith is the "illusory nature of human life," because it does not soundly answer ontological questions. Like his shadow, the narrator's wife also metaphorically weighs heavily upon his shoulders. She causes his suffering, by refusing to consummate her marriage to him, and her stubbornness gives her a certain power over him, for he remains forever longing to make love to her. His wife is adulterous, and he claims that she acts this way for the sole reason of torturing him. Therefore, he refers to her as "the bitch." He murders his wife, in the last part of the novel, but his famous last words are, "And on my chest I felt the weight of a woman's dead body..." (Hedayat 130). These words allude to the symbolic murder the ethereal girl at the beginning of the novel. Similarly, in the case of his wife, the narrator is unable to kill his feelings of anxiety towards her and the burden that she represents. The narrator nonetheless remains "weighed-down" by his madness, upon murdering his wife, in much the same way that he remains insane after killing the ethereal girl. The "bitch" is another shadow of him, "in the midst of which [he] [is] imprisoned" (Hedayat 123).

Hedayat's exposure to the West left him in turmoil, because his suicide has been interpreted as "a symptom of his inability to cope with the differences between his own culture and that of Europe" (Rahimieh 16). Thus, the author, through his narrator, is conveying a message. One interpretation of this message might simply be that the West's imposition on Eastern affairs has left the East feeling intellectually desolate, in comparison to Western and, thus, imperial standards. This is conveyed through the narrator's Orientalist attitude towards the traditions of his country. From here, there is an implicit, underlying message that the desire to unite Eastern tradition with modernity (or Western ideas) is an impossible feat: it is like proving, or disproving,

the existence of metaphysics. Mankind simply has not the means to find this proof, and this is especially evident in the present post-modern world which deconstructs "absolute" answers and questions all premises, such that "certainty" pertaining to any matter is scorned. The narrator's double consciousness, which is analogous to his irresolution of metaphysical questions, makes him a representative post-colonial subject who, like most people emerging from colonial rule, struggles to unite tradition and modernity.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Iranians still struggle to find a middle ground. Jalal ale Ahmad claims in "Iranian Education" that when European and American-educated Persians returned to Iran upon the completion of their studies, they became, contrary to what would be expected, ineffective members of society, since they no longer identified with their native culture. Indeed, they were the "perfect examples of something severed from its roots, this the result of *gharbzadegi*" (119). It seems that this was the case for Hedayat, since his narrator incarnates this very "disease," and the latter's malaise is a very real phenomenon in Iranian society today (for information about Jalal ale Ahmad and other Iranian writers, see <[www.irib.com/Ouriran/mashahir/Adabi/jalal/HTML/en/Jalal.htm](http://www.irib.com/Ouriran/mashahir/Adabi/jalal/HTML/en/Jalal.htm)>). Furthermore, ale Ahmad claims that *gharbzadegi* has been the principle cause for the vast and rapid changes observed in modern Persian literature: "the first characteristic that generally meets the eye in contemporary Persian literature, whether in poetry or in prose is factionalism of all sorts. Factionalism between the classical and the modern, the old and the young, among generations, among classes, between optimism and pessimism, and among conflicting inclinations and disparate views" (93).

Iranian writers have been prone to take on juxtapositional issues in their writing, and these issues stem from writers' exposure to Western thought which is incompatible, in many respects, with Eastern thought. In relation to Hedayat, ale Ahmad goes on to urge that the author's pessimism and confusion was his "inspiration for seeking refuge in the representation of the strange and preternatural (i.e., eccentricism)" (94). In *The Blind Owl*, the "faction" that ale Ahmad refers to is between opposing cultures, and the narrator's madness, or "eccentricity," is a reflection of the post-colonial syndrome that European omni-presence imposed on the author of this novel. This malaise generally arises from the imposition and domination of Western technology, scholarship and culture in the East, which therefore leads to the inability of the native to fully identify with either his own culture or that of the colonial/imperial power.

The play on the narrator's contamination by a "sickness" runs parallel to ale Ahmad's concept of *gharbzadegi* as a plague: "I saw that in Camus' view the plague represented 'machinism.' This killer of beauty and poetry and humanity and the sky" ("Epilogue" 145). The infiltration of Western phenomena, and especially technology, into Iranian society, is the principal cause of the *gharbzadegi* disease, as indicated by Asaf Hussain, in *Islamic Iran: Revolution and Counter-Revolution* (1985): "Gharbzadegi was described as a malaise afflicting Iranian society and the persons influenced by it had lost their roots in society and were compared to particles of dust suspended in the air being indifferent to religion and to humanity in general" (20). In fact, the Islamic Revolution in 1979 was, in part, a reaction to the long history of Western dominance in Iran, and was a violent "killer of humanity," as is any revolution; Iran is slowly recovering from the hardships. Furthermore, Iranians still do not have and "cure" for the disease.

In an article entitled "The Iranian Heritage in the Eyes of the Contemporary Poet Midhi Akhavan Salis (M. Omid)," Sorour Soroudi explains that "nowadays one can easily notice an increasing awareness among some Iranian intellectuals that modernisation, although inevitable, need not entail adoption of all aspects of Western society and its cultural values. However, Iranians differ in evaluation of their cultural and historical deposit and are not of the same mind as to what should be done in order to preserve their national identity" (132-33). Thus, issues that are raised in *The Blind Owl* are still very real today. Iran's present day modernity predicament, that is, the quest to "preserve its national identity" in the midst of "Western society and cultural values," is simply a continuation of the cultural confusion that is so vividly implied by Hedayat's narrator (for information on general, present-day Iranian news and culture, see <[www.salamiran.org](http://www.salamiran.org) and [www.persepolis.com](http://www.persepolis.com)>).

And, so, at the end of *The Blind Owl*, the narrator's inability to unburden himself from his disease, through the murder of his wife, runs parallel to his inability to solve the question of metaphysics. The "bitch" is also represented as a shadow that looms over him, and the play on shadows in the novel is the play on the omni-presence of tradition in the narrator's universe. This tradition is inescapable, for he sees it everywhere, mixing-up the past and the present. It appears to be ingrained so deeply in him that rejecting it completely becomes impossible. Tradition, whether it is pre-Islamic or Islamic, or a combination of both, as discussed above, roots itself in metaphysics, and the question of God, then, becomes the element that impedes him from rejecting tradition completely. This is where the East meets the West; the universal question of metaphysics implies that the West offers no solutions to the East's problems, although it assumes authority over it.

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