On the Peripheries of Global Modernity: Melancholic Borders of Sovereignty in Sa'edi's The Mourners of Bayal

Marjan Mohammadi
Bilkent University
(Turkey)

Abstract:

This paper focuses on a collection of eight loosely connected stories written by the Iranian dramatist and author Gholamhossein Sa'edi under the title of The Mourners of Bayal (1963). In the fourth story, which is the basis for the scenario of the celebrated Iranian New Wave film, The Cow (1969), the narrator relates the puzzling case of a farmer who has turned into his cow as a result of having lost it unexpectedly. The ominous transformation of Mash Hassan into his cow in Sa'edi's narrative is a prophetic reflection on the problem of sovereignty in Iran, positioned on the peripheries of global modernity, a US military base in the final stages of the Vietnam war and one of the major oil-producing states. This paper investigates the rise of melancholy as a response to the crisis of Iranian sovereignty during the Second World War and its aftermath.

The melancholic crisis of Iranian society in its encounter with modernity defined itself in opposition not only to the political sovereignty of the monarch that represented it but also an opposition to the imperialist tendencies of global modernity. It uses the language of centrality– peripherality to reflect on the position of Persian fiction on the periphery of the global field of shifting political and cultural hegemonies in the post-WWII period. While the melancholic subject position in The Mourners of Bayal points to an inverted dialectical power relationship, it also reveals the entanglements of histories of capitalism and imperialism in the creation of North-South global order in the postwar period.

Keywords: Sovereignty, Melancholy, Imperialism, Periphery, Global Modernity

In 1963 Gholamhossein Sa'edi published a collection of eight loosely connected stories under the title of *The Mourners of Bayal*. In the fourth story, which is the basis for the scenario of the celebrated Iranian New Wave film, *The Cow* (1969), the narrator relates the puzzling case of a farmer who has turned into his cow as a result of having lost it unexpectedly. "Mashdi Hassan pulled out his head from the haystack. His face was bloody and his eyes, weary and agitated, were revolving in their socket. His mouth was filled with the hay he was chewing; he looked at the men, roared through his throat and put back his head in the mow" (Sa'edi, 1937, p. 144).[1] Nezami Aruzi of Samarqand had also reported the story of a transformation of a man into a cow in his *Four Discourses* circa 1155. Written as a guide for the rulers and kings, the book is conceived of four parts. The fourth part, devoted to the study of medicine, relates a case of melancholia cured by the Iranian physician Avicenna. While explaining that melancholia, a disease arising from "black bile," is "a pathological condition" that physicians often fail to treat successfully, the anecdote retells the story of a prince of the House of Buyid (934-1062) who was struck by it. Affected by the disease, he imagined himself transformed into a cow. While wailing, he restlessly awaited his own slaughter so that "a good stew may be prepared from [his] flesh" (Nezami Aruzi, p. 92). The melancholic prince who has metamorphosed into a cow embodies the problem of Iranian sovereignty. Sa'edi's strange tale contemplates the melancholia of modern Iranian sovereignty by retracing its inherent paradoxes back to the Shiite beliefs that came to be systematically formulated during the Buyid era. The Buyids were the first Iranian Shiite dynasty that could reclaim sovereign authority over parts of Iran after the fall of the Persian empire.[2] The era was also significant as it

[1] All references to *The Mourners of Bayal* are my translations.

[2] For a history of paradoxical dualities in the Buyid era see George C. Miles' article "A Portrait of the Buyid Prince Rukn Al-Dawleh" where he discusses how the Buyid period was one of "vigorous nationalist revival in Persia when in literature and the arts there was a constant harking back to the great days of pre-Arab glory" (p. 290). He goes on to explain how the Buyid princes took native Iranian names such as Bakhtiyar, Khosrow, Shirdel, Firoz, etc. and how they revived the use of the title "*shāhanshāh*" (i. e. king of kings) to lay claim to royal descent, "a claim which even in their own time was recognized to be spurious" (p. 290). He adds that these returns to the Sassanian era of sovereign glory are attempts to bolster legitimacy through royal lineage since claims to earthly sovereignty are

marked a transition in Shiite views of sovereignty and polity: sovereignty was no longer solely the property of the divine but would designate "a community ruled by law that was subject to the authority of the interpreters of the law" (Calder, 1979, p. 104). The story of the melancholia of the Buyid prince, which appears in Aruzi's *Four Discourses,* could be the symptom of this unbridgeable gap between the divine and the earthly authority.[1] His sovereign position makes him inhabit the split that he desires to overcome as a ruler.[2]

In Sa'edi's modern rendition of the story this unbridgeable gap in sovereignty is extended to the sovereign's subjects. The story reflects on the question of sovereignty, which still carries within it an inherent rift, through playing on the relationship between the "sovereign" (in Persian "*ra'i*," i. e. "herdsman," "shepherd," or "ruler") and the "subject" ("*ra'iat*," i. e. "herd," "masses," or "peasants"). The collection of stories is preoccupied with an unknown force that is looming over the Bayal social order and is going to

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completely at odds with the Shiite belief in divine sovereignty. See also Cl. Cahen's "Buwayhids or Būyids" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam.*

[1] The interpretation of this gap between the divine and earthly sovereignty is at the origin of Islamic political history and the Sunni-Shiite split. Disagreements in accounting for the meaning of divine sovereignty and the acceptable modes of entrusting that sovereignty to fallible human beings led to the assassination of the fourth caliph Ali, whose reign saw the first Civil War (656-661). Ali's assassination (661) is the trauma that unleashed a politico-moral problem on the question of sovereignty in the Muslim community. While Ali agreed to an arbitration with his opponent during the Civil War, Mu'awiyya – the kinsman of the assassinated third caliph Uthman and the founder of the Umayyad dynasty (661-750) – a group of his own partisans called the *Kharijites* or *Khawarej* (i. e., those who "exited" (*kharaju*) after the battle of Siffin 657) found his submission to human authority unacceptable and slew him while he was praying in the Great Mosque of Kufa. For a history of Shiism see Mohammad-Ali Amir-Moezzi and Christian Jambet's *What Is Shi'i Islam?*

[2] After the occultation of the last imam of Shiites (believed to have happened in 872), this gap in legitimacy between divine and earthly sovereignty remained open. It was finally bridged during the Buyid era through the creation of the class of the "scholars" ("*ulama*") or "jurists" ("*fuqaha*"), who are "delegates" or "judicial sources of divine authority." Andrew March in his article "Genealogies of Sovereignty in Islamic Political Theology" explains that the jurists represent both God and the people, insofar as God's law is only known through texts that required expert knowledge to master, and the popular will of the *umma* (community) could only be ruled by God's law (p. 298). Divine sovereignty came to be a function not of a particular ruler's right to command but of the extent to which he applied God's law. Thus, the ruler's claim to sovereignty was only legitimate under the approval of the judicial authority of the scholars.

bring it sorrow. There is the fear of an invisible and potential menace forever lurking beyond the boundaries of Bayal. This ominous force is also present in Mehrjui's rendition of the fourth story as one of the most iconic films of the Iranian New Wave genre. At the time of its release in 1969, *The Cow* was perceived as an allegory for the socio-political suppressions under the Pahlavi government. Due to the depiction of despair, fear, and impoverishment, the film was banned based on a censorship code that "prohibited representations of 'backwardness' which would 'damage the state's national prestige'" (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2007, p. 377). However, the film was smuggled to the Film Festival at Venice and the International Film Festival in Chicago where it was met with critical acclaim. This led the censorship board in Iran to allow the film to be re-released by adding a disclaimer at the film's opening to state that the events depicted were "set before the Shah's modernization campaign" (Akrami, p. 130). The Second Pahlavi period influenced by the capitalist Western modernity pursued the implementation of one of the most rigorous top-down modernization programs in Iran. Apart from reflecting on the socio-political suppressions of the period, *The Cow* could be read as an elegy for the loss of Iranian sovereignty during the Second World War and its aftermath. Pervaded with multiple socio-political defeats, these years leading to the CIA coup of 1953 were perhaps the most melancholic in the modern Iranian history. The dark atmosphere of the fourth story is haunted by the missing cow. "All night the bellowing of a spirited cow that was wandering in the streets of Bayal made everyone sleepless. […] The other Bayalis sat at the threshold of their windows watching the pool and the huge wailing shadow running in the streets" (Sa'edi, 1937, p. 142). Mash Hassan's melancholic preoccupation with his lost cow is not only disturbing but also could be read as a critique of Iran's economic and political "dependency" (Mirbakhtyar, p. 54).[1] While the film depicts the social anxiety of Bayal about loss and the shadowy figures ready to cross its borders, it hints at the predicament of Iran during the sixties. This was the beginning of the period of "open revolt" against the absolute status of the Shah whose constitutional rule had been transformed and consolidated into absolute power as a result of the 1953 CIA coup, which had removed the

[1] Mirbakhtyar links this dependency to oil. According to Hamid Reza Sadr, the film is a critique of Iran's "over-dependence on only one salable commodity [i. e. oil]" (p. 132). For him the fear of losing the cow is identified with the fear of a future without oil.

democratically elected Iranian prime minister Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq. The anxiety is a response to the presence of shadowy figures as threats to the Iranian national sovereignty. Sovereignty, sometimes interpreted as a modern secularized theological concept, signifies the exercise of supreme authority within a territory, assumption of mastery over one's fate, and self-determination and realization of individual and state autonomy. The ominous transformation of Mash Hassan into his cow in Sa'edi's narrative is a prophetic reflection on the problem of sovereignty in Iran, positioned on the peripheries of global modernity.

Iran of the post-WWII period was struggling under what Foucault called "the dead weight of modernity" (2006, p. 3).[1] The Anglo-Soviet invasion and occupation of Iran (1941-1946) had created a period of political and economic upheaval. Beyond the military presence, the influence of the occupying powers had a Christian liberal extension in the south and a communist ideological extension in the north. Moreover, with the invasion and occupation of Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was getting close to the German forces was deposed and replaced by his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941). Thus began the Second Pahlavi period. Guided by the vision of a "Great Civilization," the Shah consolidated his sovereign legitimacy retracing it back to 2500 years of Persian monarchy. Iran, the frontier of empires, was also one of the major oil-producing states and a U.S. military base in the last stages of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. While visiting Iran in

[1] For Foucault, the 1979 Iranian revolution was more of a revolt. He states: "After I left Iran, the question I was constantly asked was, of course, 'is this revolution?' I did not answer, but I wanted to say that it is not a revolution, not in the literal sense of the term, not a way of standing up and straightening things out. It is the insurrection of men with bare hands who want to lift the fearful weight, the weight of the entire world order that bears down on each of us, but more specifically on them, these oil workers and peasants at the frontiers of empires. It is perhaps the first great insurrection against global systems, the form of revolt that is the most modern and the most insane" (2006, p. 3). Foucault was arguably interested in the transgressive nature of this "madness" and its ability to move beyond the rationality of Western modernity. Afary and Anderson in *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution* maintain: Foucault hopes that "what he called its 'insane' transgressive discourse would fracture the boundaries of a 'rational' modernity" (p. 105). Although Foucault, like many other philosophers of the Enlightenment, once again places the Iranian revolution outside the discourse of modern rationality, Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi argues that for him the 1979 Revolution was the evidence of the possibility of "transcending the spiritless world modernity has instituted" (p. 278).

1978, Michel Foucault wrote: "When I left Paris, I was told over and over again: 'Iran is going through a crisis of modernization.' An arrogant monarch, clumsy and authoritarian, is attempting to compete with the industrialized nations and to keep his eyes fixed on the year 2000, but the society, for its part, cannot and does not want to follow. Wounded and hurt, it comes to a halt" (1978, p. 194).[1] The melancholic crisis of Iranian society in its encounter with modernity defined itself in opposition not only to the political sovereignty of the monarch that represented it but also an opposition to the imperialist discourse of global modernity.

The story of the transformation of the Buyid prince to a cow, which appears in Aruzi's *Four Discourses*, is narrated to exemplify a case of melancholia treated by Avicenna. The Persian philosopher and physician later became the vizier of the Buyid prince Shams Al-Dawleh (997-1021), during whose reign he compiled *Canon of Medicine* (*Al-Qanun*) and completed it in four volumes by 1025. The book is an encyclopedia of medicine that presents an overview of the medical knowledge of the Islamic world and its exchanges with the traditions of Greco-Roman, Chinese, Persian, and Indian medicine and philosophy. It served as a standard medical textbook in medieval Europe until the 18th century. The writing on melancholy in Avicenna's *Canon* illustrates the way humoral theory and the symptom descriptions of melancholia traveled between ancient and medieval medicine. The word "melancholy" is derived from two Greek words, "*melas*" (black) and "*khole*" (bile), which is transcribed to "مالیخولیا" in Persian. Echoing Greek humoral theory, Avicenna proposed that there were four primary fluids or humors whose disposition explained temperament as well as states of health and disease. These were blood, phlegm, (yellow) bile, and black bile ("*sauda*," which is literally "black" or "blackness" in Arabic and in Persian a metonymy for "madness"). In "On Black Bile and Melancholy," he explains that all psychological effects – delusions, confusions, moods, and fears – stem from "overheated black bile in damaging combination with other elements such as phlegm" (p. 78). He compiles the signs of melancholia while mentioning the difficulty of easily summing them up:

[1] Foucault's article "The Shah Is a Hundred Years Behind the Times" was published in *Corriere della Sera*, October 1, 1978. The article was originally published under the title "The Shah and the Dead Weight of Modernity."

> The first signs of melancholy are bad judgment, fear without cause, quick anger, delight in solitude, shaking, vertigo, inner clamor, tingling, especially in the abdomen. When, moreover, fear is confirmed, as well as badness of judgment, there are anxiety, abandonment of conversation and craving for coitus due to a multitude of flatulence; and the appearance of fear of things which do or do not exist; and a greatness of fear of things which are not customarily feared. But these appearances certainly are indefinite. For certain bodies fear that the sky will fall on them, while others fear that the earth may devour them. Others fear robbers. Others still fear lest a wolf approach them. The following things especially they fancy: they imagine themselves made kings or wolves or demons or birds or artificial instruments. […] There are certain ones who love death. Others abhor it. Melancholy's signs, which are in the brain, are especially an overflowing of thought and a constant melancholic anxiety, and a constant looking at only one thing, and at the earth. (Avicenna, 2000, p. 77)

Here melancholia is represented as a humoral disorder that primarily affects the body. It also produces groundless fear, anxiety, and a relation to one's mortality: either the sky will fall or the earth will devour the melancholic.

Freud's 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia" construes melancholia in different terms. Melancholic states appear as disorders of ego, its boundaries, and its relationship to the experience of loss. The loss could be that of "a loved person," or "an abstraction" such as "one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (1974, p. 243). For him, melancholia is a pathological failure to come to terms with loss, such that the libido cannot form attachments to a new object of love. "Thus, the shadow of the object falls upon the ego" (p. 249). The melancholic resists the loss of the object to a point where the lost object is finally incorporated within the self, turned into the shelter of the ego, and preserved as a form of ghostly identification. In this refusal to sever attachments to the lost object, the melancholic becomes haunted by it. In melancholia "countless separate struggles are carried on over the object, in which hate and love contend with each other; the one seeks to detach the libido from the object, the other to maintain this position of the libido against the assault. The position of these separate struggles cannot be

assigned to any system but the unconscious, the region of the memory-traces of things" (p. 256). Loss denied is incorporated into the ego, and the ego becomes a remainder of the unresolved work of mourning. Freud summarizes that "in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (p. 246). Accordingly, what constitutes melancholia is the loss of the loved object, an ambivalent struggle with the loss, and the regression of the libido into the ego.

In Sa'edi's *The Mourners of Bayal,* Mash Hassan's metamorphosis into his cow could be read as a classic case of melancholia following Freud's interpretation. The ambivalent presence of intruding shadows on the borders of Bayal suggests the penetrability and insecurity of its sovereign borders. According to Freud, the mourner moves from grief to a position of accepting loss, whereas the melancholic, in contrast, exhibits a form of pathological and prolonged mourning. Unable to accept the loss of the object, the melancholic incorporates the lost object into the psyche through a process of devouring, which, as Freud describes it, is "cannibalistic" (p. 249). The transformation of the farmer into his cow also foregrounds once again the originary split in the "sovereign self" now in its encounter with the global modernity and its imperialist discourse. The melancholia of the "sovereign" position that is now extended to the "subject" not only challenges the modern conception of "sovereign subject" but also could be read as a symptom of peripheralization of a subject in relation to a center. Occupied by the loss, the melancholic devours his lost love-object in order to retain it. The result is that "the loss of the object is transformed into a loss in the ego" (Freud, 1974, p. 249). In this way, the ego's devouring of the loss empties it out from within. By placing loss as an alterity within himself, the melancholic forgoes his centrality.

The employment of melancholia in Sa'edi's stories can be read as a politico-aesthetic response with the potential to actively resist and punctuate the assimilative drive of capitalist ideology of global modernity. The language of centrality-peripherality is used here to point to the inverted dialectical power relationship. After the Second Word War, imperialism, i. e., the extension of the sovereignty of a nation-state beyond its own boundaries through political or economic influence, becomes entangled more and more with the economic hegemony of the Global North. As Hardt and Negri argue in *Empire*, the new form of sovereignty that governs the world and effectively regulates the global exchanges is capital. Underlining the peri-

pheral position of postwar Persian literature within global imaginations, Abedinifard *et* al show that "the uneven development of capitalism and globalization has meant constricted access to the world, both as material and as idea: not all nations participate in shaping and sharing the material conditions of the world equally, nor do they gain identical access to the cultural apparatuses that form and represent the global culture" (2019, p. 6). While the melancholic subject position in *The Mourners of Bayal* points to the asymmetry of periphery-center relationships of power in global modernity, it also underlines the entanglements of histories of capitalism and imperialism in the creation of North-South global order in the postwar period.

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