



Professor Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak

Professor of Persian Language, Literature, and Cultures University of Maryland
Leverhulme Visiting Professor of SOAS

“Simin Behbahani: A Career in Poetry”

What I would like to do tonight is move us to a higher level of appreciation of *Simin Behbahani*'s poetry by helping us begin an initial – and doubtless tentative – evaluation of her career in poetry. In doing so, I wish to place particular emphasis on an aspect of her art that, I think, is likely to be her consummate contribution to the history of Persian poetry, and that is to push poetry toward greater visual expressiveness. I will be arguing that Simin began with fairly traditional notions of the role of the image in Persian poetry, but came to change that role in important, telling ways by producing some of the most memorable iconic images in the modern *ghazal* genre. As my central devices for the analysis I will be introducing three concepts: the sketch, the vignette and the icon.

In poetry as well as in fiction, a sketch can be defined as a fixed visual element. Used as a basis for image-making in poetry it amounts to little more than a snapshot, a still photograph or at best a single frame in a film in words. Technically and artistically more dynamic and more elaborate, a vignette can be described as a short pithy passage where the unfolding of a plot can be perceived, but is often incidental, although the unfolding of a plot may be suggested or perceived, implied or inferred. It remains tangential as we may begin to get faint hints about a narrative in the background. The important feature of a vignette is that it tends to push the advancement of the action to the periphery of an immediate aesthetic concern, thus allowing us as readers to form a mental image of the scene that is being offered.

What writers and poets often try to communicate through vignettes is something about the dynamic or changing elements in the picture. It may reveal character, mood or tone. It may have a theme or idea of its own which the author wishes to convey, or a scene or character that is important. As such, a short impressionistic scene that focuses on a single moment or gives a trenchant impression about a character, an idea, or a setting and sometimes an object. I have

written elsewhere that, in the context of the evolution of modern Persian poetry, this type of scene-making has become more common in the past half century or so, where less emphasis is placed on adhering to the conventions of poetic structure than on the depth or cultural implications of an observed moment. Vignettes have been particularly evocative and effective in contemporary Persian poetry, a palpable and observable fact, in a historical sense, may be related to the addition of film, video and television to the canon of the arts.

Behbahani's early poems are replete with scenes and sketches of various kinds and lengths, often designed to parade before our eyes images featuring fleeting moments and feelings in the life of the downtrodden and the subaltern, the alienated and abandoned. One of her best-known early poems, a *Charpareh* in form, presents a prostitute asking someone to hand her the box containing her cosmetic:

Fetch me my box of rouge and lipstick
So I can splash color on my colorlessness,
Hand me the cream to add a new coat
Of make up on my face, drawn by low spirits.

بده آن قوطی سرخاب مرا
تا زدم رنگ به بی رنگی خویش
بده آن روغن تا تازه کنم
چهر پژمرده ز دلنتگی خویش
(«نغمه روسی»، «جای پا»، 1956)

The speaker goes on to ask the unnamed addressee for her perfume, her tight dress and lace, and, perhaps most crucially, give her a drink that would drown her misery and the all-too-apparent sadness that she fears her appearance would communicate to anyone she may encounter. She then recalls the glib compliments she had paid her clients in the previous nights, recalling a manifestly repulsive man whom she had to call most handsome, a diseased man who afflicted her with an unnamed disease, presumably sexually transmitted, which she is now suffering from. She confides that she has served many partners none of whom takes any but the most momentary interest in her, that she has no offspring to wipe the dust of loneliness off her soul. As she is recounting her woes she has to stop when she hears a knock on her door. She quickly feigns a jolly mood of gaiety just as fleeting, reminding herself to be all smiles, kisses, and coquetry.

This tendency is clearly traceable in Simin's first four collections, *Ja-ye Pa* (Footprint, poems written from 1946-1956, *Chelcheragh* (Chandelier, 1956-1957), *Marmar* (Marble, 1957-1962), and *Rastakhiz* (Resurrection, 1962-1973) we see no fewer than a score of poems in which dramatic personae appear to lament the presence of the class system and the divide between what the poets see as patrons of privilege, on one side, and denizens of deprivation on the other. Thus in "*Dandan-e Mordeh*" (The Dead Man's Tooth), we encounter a grave robber who, having been told by the corpse washer that a recently buried man had gold teeth, begins to justify his plunder to himself in these words as he digs the grave:

What good will the gold do hidden in the grave
As nobody will be able to benefit from it?
Gold buried here, and over there a sick person
Dying in hardship for lack of a remedy?!

چه حاصل زین زر افتاده در گور
که کس کام دل از وی بر نگی
زر اینجا باشد و بیماری آنجا
به بی درمانی و سختی بمیرد
(«دندان مرده»، «جای پا»، 1956)

Similarly, in “*Jib-Bor*” (Pickpocket) an imprisoned man tells us how, having been deprived of a proper upbringing, he has learned the art of picking pockets in prison and now, having been imprisoned for many times, he looks forward to learning more tricks of the trade from fellow inmates, and all he has to do in return is grant them free access to his body. And finally, in “*Havu*” (Rival Wife), we see a woman lamenting her condition, telling us how hard it is to be poor and living under the same roof with her husband and the younger rival wife to whom he is more attracted than he ever was to her. The upshot of the poem is that the woman decides to poison her “*havu*”, but ends up inadvertently poisoning her own darling daughter. The poem ends when, out of sheer desperation, she appeals to an unknown mass of people in these words:

Ah people, a mother has murdered her child
 Have mercy on her tearful eyes!
 My child has taken a fatal poison
 Help out, you may be able to save her life!

وای مردم! مادری فرزند کشت!
 رحم بر چشمان گریانیش کنید!
 طفل من نوشیده زهری هولناک
 همتی، شاید که درمانش کنید . . .
 («هوو»، چلچراغ، 1956)

These early poems remind us of a whole strain of similar compositions in romantically exaggerated expressions of mood and moment by a number of leftist poets of mid-twentieth century and in the history of Persian poetry. We see the same mood of the despondency depicted in the poem on the pain of poverty, loneliness and misery in Nima Yushij’s “*Kar-e Shabpa*” (Night Watchman’s Labor), Mohammad Asemi’s “*Ashk-e Honarpisheh*” (The Actor’s Tears) and Esmail Shahrudi’s “*Hassanalijafar*”. We see plenty of it also in post-World War II novels by Behazain, Chubak and Alavi. Here’s the point: some of the ways in which the political discourse of the Tudeh Party of Iran expressed its systemic criticism of Iranian society’s ills, such as poverty, prostitution, inequality and other malaises, only to leave the blame squarely on Iran’s political establishment finds expression in the works of artists, both men and women, sympathetic to that party’s political line.

In a later poem, titled “*Vaseteh*” (The Middle Man), Simin portrays a pimp who has been asked to provide a rich man with a young beautiful virgin. Eventually he finds and offers the desired commodity to the man in a feast that he arranges specifically for the purpose. The poem ends in his momentary hesitation whether he should accept the man’s gold coin or not; he eventually does, thinking it is, after all, gold and gold is dear to the heart. The moral in each of these works is communicated not through the operations of the poem but through connections to external ideas that have presumably brought about the conditions the poems elaborates: poverty, disease and depravation in one; patriarchy, inequality of the genders and sexual exploitation in the other; and lust, jealousy and crime in the last. I do not, of course, mean to imply by any stretch of the imagination that this strand of narrative sketches and vignettes dominates Simin’s early to poetry; far from it, Simin is first and last a lyricist who loves more than anything to write about love, tender, consensual love. My purpose is to show that when she turns her glance toward the big bad society out there, with time and greater artistry, how much and in what specific trajectory she comes to express similar themes through the kind of iconic portrayals that I will speak of later in this talk.

Drab and dreary as these poems appear when viewed from a strictly aesthetic point of view, they did challenge the notion of traditional poetry as simply an expression of idealized love and did advance some political agenda that in certain idealistic ways was arrayed against what the literary figures of the time saw as a callous and complacent political system ruling the country. In addition, Simin's early compositions often shed considerable light on aspects not just of the poet's personal life but, more importantly, on a temperament or sensibility characteristic of intellectual Iranian women of her generation.

All this began to change with the event of a revolution that nobody expected would give birth to the state that we now see in the country. As we begin to read *Khati ze Sor`at o az Atash* (A Line of Speed and Fire), it seems as though the advent of the Iranian Revolution, and particularly the tragedies and the pageantry with which it made its appearance on the social scene through the years 1977 and 1978, inaugurated a second stage in the development of Simin Behbahani's craft. This is clear even in the way this book, containing poems for 1973 to 1981 is presented to the eye. The two sections into which it is divided are titled "Up to Black Friday" and "From the Black Friday on", clearly mark the day when a group of peaceful protesters were gunned down in Tehran's Maydan-e Jaleh, now a landmark spot where the revolution's first major massacre tragedy occurred. It is also clear from the haunting poem that opens the second section and commemorating the event, "*Cheh Sokut-e Sard-e Siah*" (What a Cold Black Silence). The date and the poet's own notation under the poem "*Shamgah-e Jom`eh-ye Siah*" inaugurates a new series of such notes where the event occasioning the poem is specified. Most clearly, the point that we are in the presence of a new voice, or even a new consciousness being shaped by momentous events comes home to the reader in what I have elsewhere called a new system of signification and communication, basically meaning the new way the poems are encoded and readers are required to decode meaning, of which I will speak presently.

In *Dasht-e Arjan* (Arjan's Plain) published two years later, we see not just further developments in the direction of iconic image-making but, in addition, an equally engaging, dive into the depth of the culture in a series of uniquely significant sixteen poems titled *Kowlivarehha* and numbered from one to sixteen. Now, much like the *rend*, the *qalandar*, or the *malamati*, *Kowli* is a contrapuntal figure with an illustrious, if somewhat controversial, background in Persian literature and folklore. At times, such as in Hedayat's Patient Stone, she stands in contrast to the good girl, a stock figure of proper womanly behavior and character. At others, she appears angry, behaves against the social norms, has a rebellious character, or is even dangerously devilish. In all this, however, the *Kowli* displays the capacity for non-conformity, for revolt against the norms, and, therefore, a vast potential for agency, which I think Simin exploits deftly in these poems, as I hope to demonstrate.

Much like parables of Satan in the archetypal portrayal of religious books or *Eblis* in his Islamic garb, *Kowli* retains the potential to jolt people out of their complacencies, change widespread perceptions or impressions, or even reveal some eternal truth, as *Eblis* does in Sa'di's well-known parable. In Simin Behbahani's *Kowlivareh Cycle* of sixteen ghazals, she not only reveals some stifled truth in the culture, but lives the truth, becomes the truth incarnate, so to speak. She is the embodiment of revolt, of disobedience, of insistence on her agency and individuality. The *Kowli*, in other words, become Simin and Simin the *Kowli*, and thus is born a

most memorable image of a counterculture figure, one that is not just a mend, a qalandar with a difference; rather it is – she is – a veritable alter ego, a solid second self, the first of its kind in Persian poetry.

All this, however, does not mean that she is happy; she does suffer, is in fact subjected to all manner of pain and suffering, yet stands tall as the emblem of some subaltern strata of society. For my part, I think that if Simin had left us nothing but the sixteen witchy poems which I will refer to as the Gypsyesque cycle, her reputation would remain intact for as long as inequality, injustice and discrimination were the order of the day in human societies. It is for this reason, primarily, that I intend to give these poems their due by lingering on them at some length.

From the beginning, in Gypsyesque 1, we see an introductory opening that reveals the poet's intention to create a series in the same vein and promises more vignettes. Here we are introduced to a speaker questioning a real gypsy, asking if on the tribal journey she is about to set out on, she would take her along. "Is there room for a stranger in your midst", she asks, only to add a moment later that she too has a commodity for sale, "my delicate poems," she says, rival the snake's eyelashes in tenderness. What is the value of what I peddle where you are headed? It is only at the end of the poem that we as readers realize that the speaker is facing a mirror, or, in effect addressing herself in the mirror. Thus the gypsy becomes the mirror image of the speaker with all the sameness-and-difference potential hidden in the image and the self. The poet concludes the introduction in these words:

Ah, it is I who am the gypsy, no one is here
but me

I see the image of the gypsy as long as I keep
looking in the mirror.

کولی منم، آه! اینجا به جز من کسی نیست

تصویر کولی ست پیدا، رویم در آینه تا هست

The depth that this initial poem provides for the entire cycle is as unmistakable as the aura it casts over the fifteen poems that follow and characterize one of the most memorable chains of poetry in Persian literature.

In the second Gypsyesque, we see the gypsy entering the vast expanse of a plain as if it were a stage where we are destined to witness some extraordinary drama of the human condition unfolding before our eyes, turning everything alive as if with an electrical switch, as she passes over the flora. She thus turns the furniture of the nature into props for the drama of her own condition. As the speaker announces, "At the sound of the gypsy's steps the plain woke up, the brook rising to the brim with the clarity of her gaze", as the bodkin that was her trust, hidden between her breasts, is designed to ward off the dastards. In the end we see her in deep deathlike sleep, perhaps overcome by some potion and violated by a horseman who has poured what the poem calls "*khabdaru*" (sleep-inducing drug) in her cup of wine as the gypsy woman is playing on her musical instrument. The poem ends with an eternally ambivalent line:

What is left are the desert and the gypsy, the
horse, the ewe, and the basket
Is this the sleep of death? Alas, would
that she could wake up!

دشت مانده ست و کولی، اسب و میش و سبدها
مرگ خوابی ست هیهات، کاش بیدار می شد

The shame of being reduced to the plaything of a single night, the pain of the lover's abrupt departure, and the void of being left by a dying fire, all turn in Gypsyesque Three into omens of a fate to unfold in the poems to take up the narrative of the gypsy's love. It is signals of this kind that turn the Gypsyesque poems into the culmination of the Behbahani's tendency to wrap ideas in vignettes of pithy expressions of an ultimately reconciling the reality of life confronting the vastness of the human desire.

Gypsyesque 4 is addressed to the man, possibly the very horseman whom we saw abandoning the gypsy woman in the previous poem. Interestingly, the speaker assumes a reconciliatory posture, as if trying to persuade the horseman to return to the gypsy, reinforced by the rhyme words "*bi to*" (without you): she describes the wondering gypsy as alone, caught in the mist and the rust without you, she says in the opening line. The poems continues in that vein, informing the horseman that the gypsy is left with a quandary without him, wondering what other beloved "*yar*" she can have without him, her mirror is clouded without him, she can hardly drag herself to a nearby well, without you, she has no suitor or seeker (*kharidar*) without you. The speaker closes the poem by asking the man to return soon, or as the poem puts it, "*zud bia*" (come back soon), before her diseased heart should die of grief. Are we seeing a reflection of the social status of a woman in her condition, so often viewed as damaged goods, something akin to a half chewed-up morsel of some sort? As the poet's mouthpiece, the speaker certainly comes close to that articulation.

After a long exhausting journey, we see an analogy in Gypsyesque 5 in which our gypsy is approaching a garden, perhaps hungry for what the garden in her sight may have to offer. She climbs the garden wall like a fearful sable having just crawled out of its hiding place. It is only after we read adverbial phrases poetically conceived such as "exhausted, exhausted, exhausted by the distance" (*khasteh khasteh khasteh-ye rah*) and "thirsty, thirsty, thirsty for light" (*teshneh teshneh teshneh-ye nur*), immediately followed by the plucking of an apple from an extended branch that we begin to see the analogy between the thievish behavior of the gypsy and the violation of the laws of property and propriety that the poem has been working towards expressing. The poem's last two couplets are sobering indeed, whether they are read as articulating the fears of a punitive moral and legal code in the deranged mind of the gypsy or the actuality of her fate as the governing arbiters of religious morality would have it:

Piety opens its scroll, reads the verdict for the sin
Reason raises its cleaver cutting both the hand
and the apple
The gypsy has fallen unconscious; the fruits of
light are silent
Each resembling a severed hand dripping blood.

شرع برگشاده طومار، حکم این گناه خوانده
عقل برکشیده ساطور، دست و سیب را بریده
کولی افتاده مدهوش، میوه های نور خاموش
هریکی بریده دستی، خون ازو فروچکیده . . .

The next Gypsyesque, the sixth in the cycle, is addressed to the gypsy woman, whom it depicts in a dreamlike state. Or is it a nightmarish recollection? “A vertigo from a vortex revolved in your head, gypsy”, the speaker says. Your firm body turned into that of a dark red mare filled with straw and fell upon your bed. You were a phoenix whose wings betrayed her down to the nadir of helplessness. And at that moment, it seemed as though a kind hand was fastening a charm around your neck. In a delirious slumber, he appeared and scattered stars into the skirt of your trust, robbed a caressing hand along your tresses, spread the warmth of love upon the ashes of your body, tied an amulet of rubies on your right arm and a hundred fragments of kisses on your left one, the sweetness of stars melted in the cup of the milky way at dawn.

Sleep left your head and you saw no charm,
no amulet, and no sign of love.
A sigh crossed your parched lips; a teardrop
fell for your wet eyes.

خواب از سرت رفت و دیدی تعویذ و مهر و نشان نیست

آهی گذشت از لب خشک، اشکی ز چشم ترت ریخت

In Gypsyesque 7 the gypsy is depicted as eavesdropping and peeping into a bedroom that was once hers and noticing her man's love-making with another woman. The poem then becomes a bit distant, as it begins to describe the scene as the spying gypsy absorbs it through a passionate love-making scene on one side of the door and utter chaos in the head and heart of the gypsy on the other. As the fog of confusion settles, once more we see the dictates of culture and religion surrounding the poem: “Be content with the one-fourth that is your fair share, the commanding voice retorted/ For this was your allotted share of the apple”. And the poem comes to a close in a sorrowful transformation of tenderness into the kind of an image of ireful outrage depicted literally as the needle pine. The harshness that we see in such images produced and packaged by a well-powerful patriarchy is analogous indeed to certain images of the literary character known as the mad woman in the attic in certain western literary works.

The gypsy grew sickly frail, lank as a needle
Was planted in the earth, much like a seedling
Springtime arrived and the gypsy sprouted
through the earth,
In the shape of a pine, covered in needles.

نحیف شد کولی ز غصه چون سوزن
چو دانه اش چندی به خاک مدفن بود
بهار شد کولی ز خاک سر بر کرد
به گونه کاجی که غرق سوزن بود

Gypsyesque 8 contemplates a theme that has been a constant preoccupation of many poets of modern Iran. To leave the country for a life in exile or to remain an exile at home, and the objective fact of the gypsy way of life, one of constant movement rather than sedentary settlement, of in effect making movement one's governing condition, fits the theme both because Behbahani's gypsy is a woman – i.e., one whose movements have been historically restricted by patriarchal forces, and of restrictions on social mobility and by the prevalence of ambivalent feelings that modern poets have shown toward life in the homeland versus in exile. The poem does address certain constants of the specific image nurtured in the cycle thus far: here too the gypsy woman is in love. Yet, when it comes to the crucial question of staying or leaving, the poem stops at seems to stop at a crossroad simply asking the question: “What are you doing here, gypsy? In this strange exile at home you will not have peace in life nor a tomb after your death”.

As if the poet feels the need to tackle an even more fundamental question, Gypsyesque 9 changes the subject to the issue of willful death by design or decision. The hazards of a gypsy woman's solitary life compels her to carry instruments of self-annihilation as well as of murder and, as such, the gypsy always hides a bodkin somewhere in her dress and poison in the ring she is wearing. At the autumn of her life, the gypsy woman in the poem feels that a new love is blossoming in her, as if it were springtime again. It is the speaker, which so often functions as the gypsy woman's alter ego, however, that takes it upon herself to issue a dire warning. First, complications are likely to arise if "the new love" (*eshq-e tazeh*) confronts the gypsy's life partner, what the poem calls the holder of "the ancient covenant" (*payman-e kohneh*). Second, if the guardians of public morality get wind of her condition, she would surely receive the severest of punishments. Yet, she keeps the thought of her bodkin and the poison she is carrying with her because, as the speaker confesses, "you know the consequences of this intoxication, and still remain fearless". Yet, she is forced to add "you will submit to death but will not defy your heart".

The mood seems to shift slowly yet appreciably as we move to the later Gypsyesques. In number 10 nature seems to come alive with traces from the gypsy's love and we see her being guided by the speaker to note signs of her lover's passage through the lush nature that surrounds her. An arrow on a tree trunk raises the likelihood that he has planted it there, the singing of a lark may testify to a love song that he has hummed for her, and the dewdrops in the bowl-like fold of the wild chicory may be holding the teardrops he must have shed, thinking of her. The poem ends as the spear suggests that an arrow, and perhaps by extension all the other traces of the beloved should have become ornaments on her body.

One of the best-known poems in the cycle, perhaps because of the topical turn it takes toward the end, Gypsyesque 11 heralds the horseman's imminent return in its opening line: "The horseman is returning," the speaker tells the gypsy woman, "clean up your house!" She goes on to instruct the gypsy on ways of entertaining the visiting beloved who is going to be there a single night, before pressing on as the gypsy way of life requires him to do. She should prepare the food and the wine, bathe and dress herself in her most welcoming attire including her best jewelry, and prepare to play a song recalling youthful love, leave behind the silence that has been a constant feature of her solitary life, and sing and dance, filling the house with laughter to celebrate the occasion. Most importantly, she should do the man's bidding in every bit of detail all night through, for that is the courtesy a gypsy woman extends to one she loves. The poem's haunting ending connects all this to the reigning reality of the gypsy's milieu – i.e., the Iranian theocracy:

At dawn, as the prosecuting judge issues the
verdict of stoning,
Prepare to perform the lover's prayer, do your
ablutions in blood!

سحر که حکم قاضی رود به سنگسارت
نماز عاشقی را به خون دل وضو کن

After this bursting expression of sensuality leading to the possibility of the violence that the poet sees in her country's rulers the series turn to more mature and sobering thoughts, expressed in greater intimacy than might be expected. Gypsyesque 12 retreats to the gypsy's nocturnal silence: the twilight atmosphere of a running brook and the silvery glide of a fish are filled suddenly by the ominous song of a cuckoo bird, singing her song: *ku, ku, ku!* The sound of

the song is particularly evocative in Persian as the monosyllabic word “*ku*” also means “where is it” or “where did it go”, thus imparting to the poem a strong and uniquely nostalgic sense of *ubi sunt!* The song makes the gypsy, now most intimately identified with both the speaker and the gypsy woman, think:

What bird’s song was this, so stirring, so
ringing in nocturnal stillness
Your crystalline soul trembles, from the
fillip of awareness

این صدای چه مرغی بود در سکوت شبانگاهی
جام جان تو می لرزد از تلنگر آگاهی

The awareness thus communicated casts a somber shadow over the rest of the poems in the series, and over both the speaker and the gypsy, now rolled into a single consciousness. At fifty, the she-wolf of age has started the trajectory of an irreversible decline, whether one does or does not feel like sustaining love in life, thus tearing asunder the curtain of all pretences, not just to immortality but to life itself, casting a pall over life itself:

Its piercing arrowhead tears the heart of
your illusions
What bird song was this in the depth of
nocturnal silence?

می درد دل او هامت با خلیدن زوبینش
این صدای چه مرغی بود در سکوت شبانگاهی

In Gypsyesque 13 we seem to step out of the world of alter egos, doubles or second selves momentarily to enter the real world of relations between men and women, with the concept of gypsy being reduced to little more than a designation by which to call the female of the human race. It is about time, the poet seems to say, for women represented by the word gypsy here, to announce her presence and, in doing so, to declare her emancipation from all sorts of dependency on men. The culmination of this revolt sees women liberating their bodies and souls, pressed under the weight of long dark ages (*a`sar-e tireh-ye dirin*) to declare her presence on the pages of histories and stages of societies. In doing so, woman would be putting an end to a stifling situation where, in the course of many millennia, presumably over the entire reign of patriarchy, the male of the species has made of himself a monster whose very breath has burned eyes and throats of both men and women, has plundered the heritage of the female-folk, and has reduced her to silent acquiescence in a horrid system of gender relations. To rectify this untenable situation the woman has to speak, sing, dance, love, and make her presence felt:

So that you would not die, Gypsy, you must
slay silence.
That is, in sanctifying your existence, you
must sing!

کولی! برای نمردن باید هلاک خموشی
یعنی به حرمت بودن باید ترانه بخوانی

In what at first glance may appear as a retrogression in the basic thrust of the series, Gypsyesque 14, the only one in the series that has been dedicated to a real man, the speaker advises the gypsy to “hide your heart in the corner of the backroom”, so the sound of its song of loving would not reverberate in silence. It is a wondrous bird, the heart, its ruby beaks must be clipped so it would not pluck stars one by one from the sky. She then dispenses the advice that

seems to counter the one in the previous gypsyesque – i.e., that the gypsy should hide her love, to emit flames like a letter thrown in fire, and to sign the scroll of her woes with her finger soaked in blood from her heart (*emza-ye ghamnamehha ra angosht dar khun-e del zan*). Crying aloud will only scatter your dignity in dust, so put the mask to shame with your random laughter. The injustice of ages has found a refuge in your bones and the lancet-master of the age cannot heal the wound, a leprous spring (*bahar-i jozami*) has set up tent in the plain of your soul, and now all you have is the puss of hatred (*cherk-e nefrat*) in the blister of every bud. Every rose's petals appears to you as a bloody wound, every branch like a seven-stranded whip. Paradoxically, the poem's last line seems an invitation to silence, deep and eternal silence:

You asked the friend for a sign of the truth,
gypsy, and he spoke thus:
“Profound, great exegesis: eternal silence!”

کولی نشان حقیقت از دوست پرسیدی و گفت:

«تفسیر ژرف عظیمش: خاموشی جاودانه»

Admittedly, the baffling ending we have here does not lend itself to an easy interpretation, and I will not pretend to have solved the riddle of this ending. Suffice it to say that Gypsyesque 14 is anomalous at best, a momentary rereading of the set of ideas that the poet has been pursuing throughout the series. It appears commensurate neither with the previous ones nor with the two that follow this. The only possibility I see that might resolve the impasse would be that it is a counterpoint that makes the point even more starkly clear, that silence is no remedy and that one would have to pass through it to experience it both as one who knows her only salvation is through speaking and one who looks for words from those condemned to age-old silences such as women have been subjected to. And as we shall see, the poem that follows strengthens that conjecture.

Gypsyesque 15 opens with an insistence on the need to cry out one's condition, as madness has become rampant to remain silence: “Howl again, Gypsy, madness has taken over! The stifled lump in your throat is killing you, scream, and cry out loud!” What has happened, we learn through the lines, is that the gypsy has fallen in love again, and an illogical love it is. The speaker tells her that her whole being is love, her life depends on love, and denying that existential fact would be tantamount to denying that she is alive. Instead, she should climb the rooftop and declare, loud and clear, that she is in love. She is going through a revolt of the body (*shuresh-e tan*), the speaker says, inviting her interlocutor “to break out, tear up, and root out” all that has grown so rampant inside her. The problem that now presents itself is that even the speaker feels herself inadequate, not up to the advice she is issuing. The signal for her inability in the poem is the repeated use of “no!” and “no, no!” through which she keeps correcting her advice on what the gypsy is supposed to do to rid herself of the condition that seems to be pushing her to wilder and wilder manifestations of crazy love. Having gone through several iterations, many followed by hasty withdrawals, the final advice is that she should not wear her heart as an ornament upon her dress; rather she should turn her heart into a bird of prey and present it to her horseman to carry it on his arrow as something of a trophy:

No, no, keep it to yourself, but come the
moment to meet him,
Stick it on your horseman's arrowhead as if
it were a bird of prey!

نه! نه! نگاه دار ولی، ميعاد چون رسيد، دلی

چون مرغکی شکار شده بر نیزه سوار بزن

Set against the backdrop of a desert sunset, the last poem in the cycle, *Gypsyesque 16*, features an intimate apostrophe to the horseman. The speaker, pointing to the figure of the gypsy, now turned into an idol made of ebony and gold, points to the diamond of a teardrop in the corner of her eye and the kohl of her black eyes as the trace left from her love of him and God's favor upon her. The fire of her passion has now subsided and the tribe to which she belongs has departed. Yet she stands, weary but not uninterested, which is evident from her posture, the speaker reiterates, "she desired none but you"! The ending question, dangling over this and the preceding poems in the cycle is the ultimate indeterminate iteration of her steadfastness in love as distant from his wayward attitude: "So, where is your gypsy" or "Where is the gypsy in you?", the poem asks. The enigmatic ending to the cycle cannot be resolved with internal textual evidence, although we have every indication to believe that the figure of the gypsy testifies to the near total unattainability of love, as the purest of passions.

A momentary reflection on the *Gypsyesque Cycle* in a talk not entirely devoted to it, must include some initial observations on its place in Behbahani's *oeuvre* and, more generally, in the unfolding of modern and modernist practices in Persian poetry, and within the history of the aesthetic tradition we call Persian poetry. One way to go about doing this is to look for analogous chains of poems connected by title or theme or vision, and to discuss how the links in the chain may be connected. When I look at things that come to mind most easily, I am thrown back on such works as the *Ida* poems in *Shamlu's oeuvre*, or the bird poems of Nima Yushij, or the series of Eshaqi's poems that are thematically linked with his haunting vision of the transition from Zoroastrian Iran to Islamic Iran.

The first of these chains, *Shamlu's Ida Cycle*, provokes most commentary in comparison with Behbahani's *Gypsyesques*. In both, we see love as the central theme and driving force and thrust of the series. In Simin's chain, however, we have a dramatic device of the persona which may be designed to take the focus away from identification or even a direct connection with the author – the gypsy woman is, after all, Behbahani's double or second self or alter ego. Beyond her, we have the figuration of many mythical or historical shadowy figures in Persian poetry, characters such as Khezr for Moses, Shams for Rumi, or Rumi for Iqbal. In comparison, it strikes me; Behbahani's gypsy is existentially different from all of these because she is, first and foremost, a woman lover, an entity we meet only in Simin's contemporary, Forugh Farrokhzad. To teach men that they too can be beloveds is an important part of what I have referred to elsewhere as the drive away from idealized models of aesthetic creation to realistic ones in modern and modernist Persian poetry, a deliberate distancing effort that marks the idealizations of the past as the formative approach to love in the classical tradition of Persian poetry.

The difference between Simin's and Forugh's approaches to teaching men to be loved and to appear in poetry as beloveds is by definition a modern move. Undoubtedly, the fact that Farrokhzad the poet places herself in the position of the one who loves, shows an unflinching determination to be modern, even at the expense of some vulnerability to Farrokhzad the person, and as we know all too well the callous culture around her doled out to her appellations that landed her in mental hospitals more than once. Indeed that very fate may well have sobered Simin up to the idea of wrapping her drive in the cloak of a second self or an alter ego more easily distinguishable from herself as a woman, thereby giving her some protection against the

kind of onslaughts that Farrokhzad received. That aside, the manner in which these two contemporary poets have chosen to express the emotion of love can give us a beginning for articulating substantive differences between the vision of a modern poetry emancipated from the confines of verse forms – say *qalebha-ye now* (new casts) as distinct in appearance from the *qalebha-ye kohan* or *qadimi* or *sonnati* (ancient, old or traditional), making it possible to overcome the binary opposition between old verse and new verse.

Secondly, Simin's gypsy woman is more modern and far more active, as she exerts considerably greater agency over her life than Shamlu's Ida, who seems to be the happy yet passive recipient of male love and demands more attention, but that, I am certain, is far too obvious a distinction to take much of our time here. Finally, the gypsy woman of Simin's Gypsyesque poems is not necessarily an Iranian, nor tied to that identity; far from it, she is, if anything, quite distinct from the educated, urban-dwelling and urbane woman who is likely to be portrayed as the object – or subject, as the case may require – of love in the modernist tradition. In fact, she can be seen as the other of this social type and, as I see it, that distinction does not go far enough. I would argue that she is in fact a generalized figuration of an every woman, if only an every woman were allowed to make an appearance in the aesthetic world of the Persian ghazal. In the end, she is a figure not just beyond national identity but needless of it, not just cosmopolitan, but nomadic by temperament. As such, she remains unrestrained by conventions, defying the universe of world-wide patriarchy, otherwise known as civilized society.

Our last word about the Gypsyesque cycle relates to the problem of coherence in it. Like all poetry cycles, these sixteen poems provoke the question of whether they add up to more than the sum of each single ghazal. It is entirely possible to imagine that the poet may have begun the series with the idea of an overall coherence, but in practice, found the task too complicated. What leads me to this conjure, and it is just a conjecture, is that Simin's genius is more anchored in pure iconic lyricism, rather than lyrical narration. Her narrative poems do tend to begin to fall apart, once the telling starts to stretch beyond a certain length. So many of her compositions demonstrate her inclination to compress long complicated stories of poverty, helplessness and despondency into short pithy poems. She may also have found the form of the ghazal too restrictive, or herself at a loss about saying more than these poems have said, or may have felt she had nothing more of substance or significance to add, or something like that. A more definitive conclusion may have to await the outcome of greater and more in-depth discussions; they certainly deserve to be discussed in much greater details.

As the years went by and some early signs of the revolution's aftermath began to emerge, Simin's will to visual representation emerged as a central organizing principle in her poetry began to jell. Beginning with a clear conviction based on the sociality of all poetry may have led everything that followed in the direction of single solid images enveloped in utterances that go as deeply as possible into the innards of history and myth. This conviction, coupled with an intuitive sense of craftsman and the will to become better with age and practice, may well be all we need to explain the heights that Simin's poetry conquered in the last three decades of her life. Her movement toward greater clarity and precision in image-making, her transition from a metonymy- and synecdoche-based approach to relations of analogy and substitution to an idea of complete and total metaphor (a complex discussion which I will not open here for lack of time), may be subsidiary contributors to her impressive achievement as a poet in this regard.

Nowhere is the presence of the new voice more traceable than Behbahani's early attempts at moving from vignettes that may open the way to political expressions that appear to have deeper cultural anchoring. One early sign of the new tendency in among poems came in a poem first published in *Arjan's Plain* and is structured as the recollection of a childhood memory of play with a play partner of her childhood. Here's the poem I am referring to, composed in 1982 and titled "I Used to Say Back Then":

I used to say back then: "I am afraid of snakes"
and would add: "very afraid!", for emphasis:

من آن روز می گفتم که از مار می ترسم
و تاکید می کردم که بسیار می ترسم

At play, you would make a snake out of a
piece of rope;

به بازی طنابی را تن مار می کردی
من آشفته می گفتم از این کار می ترسم

Fearful, I would shout: "cut it out, I am
really afraid".

چو بر دوش می بستی دو مار دروغین را
به فریاد می گفتم که بردار می ترسم

You would then fasten them on your
shoulders; perturbed,

تو گفتی که ضحاکم من از درد نالیدم
که جابر جبون جانی جوان خوار می ترسم

I would scream: "take'em off, I'm afraid".
You would say: "I'm Zahhak, the serpent-
shouldered king", and I would lash out:
"timid tyrant, callous youth killer! I'm
afraid".

تو خندیدی و گفتی که بازی است من گفتم
ز بازی که انجامد به کشتار می ترسم

You laughed it off: "it's only a game, you
would say",
And I retorted, I fear all games that end up in
killings.

گرفتند جان ماران تو را خنده وحشت شد
گرفتی ز دامانم که مگذار می ترسم

سر از یاس جنباندم نگاهم نشانی شد
ز در ماندگی یعنی به ناچار می ترسم

Your laughter turned into pure panic as the
snakes turned alive,
Fearful, you held on to my skirt, pleading:
"do something!"

پی پاس خود زان پس بسا مغز برکندی
من از مار اینک نه که از یار می ترسم
(«من آن روز می گفتم»، *دشت ارژن*، 1983)

With a petrified look, I shook a helpless head
revealing regret, inevitable fear, unavoidable
dread.

To sustain your life you killed multitudes,
gouged out many brains and now I am afraid
more of my friends than of venomous snakes.

Even at a first glance anyone slightly familiar with the legend of *Zahhak*, as related in the *Shahnameh*, recognizes the references to the myth. But the way the playmate in question, presumably a young boy, plays on the natural aversion of the young girl who is now the speaker of the poem, recalling a specific unpleasant memory from her childhood is a unique twist on the

mythical account. How is it possible for a piece of rope to turn into live snakes? What the little girl never knew then which she does now is that any childish game can reveal something significant about the character of the child at play if it is left unchecked to become part of his character as a grown-up; and that is what the poem leaves unsaid. That a plaything like a piece of rope tied on the shoulder may be expressive of an imagination that can go awry, that when violence expressed in childhood play is not balanced in the process of upbringing and can lead to the actual practice of violence that takes many victims if it manifests itself as a trait embedded in a character is the sobering thought the poem communicates but does not explain.

Similarly, the manner in which this transition occurs remains a mystery that the poem either does not or cannot reveal. How is it that the snakes of the play actually come alive, as the poem specifically states.

The way the operations of the poem convey meaning cannot tell us how this is being constructed. While the sound of the rhyming words “*yar*” and “*mar*” is poetic on the one hand and haunting on the other, we do not really learn how we are expected to relate the two to their referents in the poem. Are we supposed to think that the friends of the speaker’s childhood have now turned into the tyrannical usurpers of the country and killers of the youth? Are we to see this as some sort of oblique allusion to the turncoat *Tudeh Party* companions of the speaker’s childhood years? Similarly, how are we expected to relate the entirety of the childhood game to the speaker’s present assertion that she is now more afraid of friend than snakes? Is she referring to the violence that was perpetuated in the name of the revolution? I have no answers.

Following the presumption that the poet may be working her way toward a more unified approach to image-making we begin to sense some giant strides forward in a poem titled “Abd Consider the Camel” and composed only a few years after “I Used to Say Back Then”, in 1985 to be exact. Here’s the poem in its entirety:

And consider the camel, how he was made
Not out of grime and grit, but of disillusion
and patience

و نگاه کن به شتر آری که چگونه ساخته شد باری
نه ز آب و گل که سرشتندش ز سراب و حوصله
پنداری

On disillusion, you’ve seen the mirage, how
it deludes the eye,
Yet the mirage knows nothing of the
camel’s vast patience

و سراب را همه می‌دانی که چگونه دیده‌فریب آمد
و سراب هیچ نمی‌داند که چگونه حوصله می‌آری

And how he displays patience, facing thirst,
sand, and salt
Eyeing in agony the expanse of the desolate
desert

و چگونه حوصله می‌آری به عطش، به شن، به
نمکزاران
و حضور گستره را دیدن به نگاهی از سر بیزاری

And you sense your tears emptying you
from all awareness
And with what in the world will you fill up
this void.

And in this void you see the thirsty camel's
craving
How wild passion exceeds the plenitude of
his patience

Bearing the burden no more, he shows his
rows of teeth
Gives up on pent-up patience, vents out
vengeance

And look, how he senses the mirage, loses all
hope
And tears asunder his driver's vein: now,
you, consider the camel!

و نگاه کن که نگاه اینجا ز شیار شوره نشان دارد
چو خطوط خشک پس از اشکی که به گونه هات شود
جاری

و به اشک بین که تهی کردت ز هر آن چه مایه آگاهی
و تو این تهی شده را باید ز کدام هیچ بینباری؟

و در این تهی شده می بینی هیمن اشتر عطشان را
که جنون بر آمده با صبرش، نرود سبک به گرانباری

و جنون دو نیشه رخشان شد به صف خشونت دندانها
که ز صبر کینه به بار آید، که ز کینه زخم شود کاری

و نگاه کن که به کین تیزی رگ ساریان زده با دندان
ز سراب حوصله تنگ آمد، و نگاه کن به شتر، آری
(«و نگاه کن»، یک دریچه آزادی، 1995)

The whole poem here is a moving image of oneness not only of a camel and his jockey but of the observers and the observed scene, a collapsing of the speaker and the addressee into one with the objects of the observation – namely, the camel and the jockey. At one and the same time these – and we are – or become, the camel we are asked to contemplate and are contemplating. It is a marvel of image-making how the merger take place. The abstracting process begins as the speaker tells the reader what the camel under consideration is and is not made up of, and as we begin to see the dynamics of the abundance of patience and vehemence of wrath, the two attributes camels are known for in Iranian culture, begin to connect the human observers – both the speaker who is inviting the addressee to see and their seeing eyes – with the objects of their observation, the camel and the jockey who is guiding the increasingly thirsty animal, not to water but to the edges of a vast mirage are transformed into entities in a relationship of command and guidance, on the one hand, and patience and thirst, on the other. The merger is complete by the time we reach the void in which we are asked to see the extent of the camel's craving for water and watch how his "passion exceeds the plenitude of his patience" (*jonun baramadeh ba sabrash*). This is the point at which the camel bites the jockey's vein, a scene in which we are asked, once more, to "consider the camel". That the camel we are asked to consider now stands for the people and the camel-jockey for the rulers who are driving him to the edge of a mirage is now complete with no external reference; the impression comes entirely as a result of the poem's internal workings.

The surplus value of a consideration of this metaphorical camel comes from the fact that the phrase "consider the camel" is a Koranic one, a divine exhortation to Muslims to contemplate the camel, presumably to learn a lesson. The ultimate force hidden in the lesson the poem teaches us, or those of us who may be capable of accompanying the poet's invitation to consider the camel, or any creature made of – or characterized by – "disillusion and patience" (*sarab o howseleh*) comes from the fact that it relates to the camel jockeys of a society whose political

leaders claim to be guiding forth in the name of Islam. In other words, the poet's ultimate *jibe* at the rulers of her country does not accrue the impression that they are leading the people under their command to a mirage, but to the fact that they are doing so in the name of Islam and are guided by the very book in which God asks everyone to contemplate the camel. What *Simin Behbahani* is communicating through the poem is not just that the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran are misguiding the people of Iran but that they do not even understand the injunctions and exhortations in the Holy Scriptures of the religion in whose name they are doing so. The upshot of the process is that our poet presents a far greater reach and anchor in turning vignettes into some of the most palpable icons of historical significance or topical relevance, as we see in the portrayal of the one-legged man in a 1987 poem, to which we will now turn:

The man who has lost one leg wears folded pants
His looks are of wrath and fire, meaning, why you are looking!

I turn my face away yet his form has settled in my eyes
He looked so young, certainly no more than twenty

Would that he would not have forty more years of pain
Even though being is a pain in itself, no would or would not

With my two legs perfectly fine, the going was so hard
How would he go then, with less than a pair of good legs

The tap tap of his crutch registers his presence on the earth
Even though his presence need not have a seal or sign at all

My loving smile turned in his eyes into a barb, a dagger

This man, so used to violence, cannot bear tenderness

شلوار تا خورده دارد مردی که یک پا ندارد
خشم است و آتش نگاهش یعنی: تماشا ندارد

رخساره می‌تابم از او اما به چشمم نشسته
بس نوجوان است و شاید از بیست بالا ندارد

بادا که چون من مبادا چل سال رنجش پس از این
- خود گر چه رنج است بودن بادا مبادا ندارد-

با پای چالاک بیما دیدی چه دشوار رفتم
تا چون رود او که پای چالاک بیما ندارد

تق تق کنان چو بدستش روی زمین می‌نهد مهر
با آن که ثبت حضورش حاجت به امضا ندارد

لبخند مهرم به چشمش خاری شد و دشنه‌ای شد
این خویگر با درستی نرمی تمنا ندارد

بر چهره‌ی سرد و خشکش پیدا خطوط ملال است
یعنی که با کاهش تن جانی شکبیا ندارد

Lines of weariness are evident on his face,
cold and bone dry
And give him some advice in a motherly
way
I turn to him again, hoping to strike a
conversation
His place is empty, he's gone, the man who
has lost a leg.

گویم که بامهربانی خواهم شکیبایی از او
پندش دهم مادرانه، گیرم که پروا ندارد

رو می‌کنم سوی او باز تا گفت و گویی کنم ساز
رفته‌ست و خالی‌ست جایش مردی که یک پا ندارد...
(«مردی که یک پا ندارد»، یک دریاچه آزادی، 1995)

What is striking at first glance about this poem is the absence of a dialogue, that the entire poem happens in the mind of the speaker without a words exchanged between her and the one-legged man. What replaces dialogue here is the back and forth gaze of the sixty-year-old speaker and the man with the folded pants who, the speaker tells us, must be no more than twenty years old. We see these glances in the first couplet, where we also learn of the woman's interpretation of the man's glance. Followed by her immediate withdrawal of her glance, presumably out of respect for the man's wishes not to have her look at him. The poem then gives the speaker's thoughts about life, her own struggles, and a question about how the man would manage to move through life with only one leg. Still with her gaze averted the woman hears the tap tap of the man's crutch and realizes that he is moving about with little problem. Thinking why the man may have taken offense at her looking at him, she hits on the idea that the man's attitude may have been shaped by the violence he may have witnessed and practised in the war, that in her words this man, "so used to violence, cannot bear tenderness". She then decides to exchange a few words of sympathy and advice and turns back to toward him only to sees that the man has left the scene.

In comparison with visual images, auditory ones are a rarity in many poetic traditions. When they occur, however, they bring their own wordless force, especially if the sense of sight is also omitted, either inadvertently or deliberately, as in this case. What could be the meaning of the tap tap of the man's crutch to the woman, we may well wonder, for instance. One thing is sure, though, he has been much faster in moving away from her than she had imagined possible, leaving her and us fairly certain that he will be able to move his defective body with little difficulty, but that, as far as his mind is concerned, he is still harboring much resentment, a sense of being alienated from the rest of the society. His condition is, in effect, what we now may call post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. It is in this way that the one-legged man becomes a veritable icon of a condition that is brought about by the war, presumably the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. From first to last, the man's angry glance at the speaker's motherly concern, his presence and the emotions he will have to live with, and the sound of the his crutch registering "his presence on the earth" under her body become signifiers of a condition that is entirely iconic as it is presented here.

In yet another instance of iconic image-making my last example in the series, we have an iconic depiction of the speaker-poet herself engaged in an act of traditional *mofakhereh* (Ceremonial Boasting). In this 2002 and poem the poem's internal operations are cast in the guise of a spirited retort to the functionaries of the Iranian state. Here, once again, is the poem in its entirety:

One meter seventy my words rose up
One meter seventy I am of the poetry of this
house
One meter seventy, pure and simple
Tender spirit of love poetry, patient figure of
Femininity

یک متر و هفتاد صدم افراشت قامت سخنم
یک متر و هفتاد صدم از شعر این خانه منم

یک متر و هفتاد صدم پاکیزگی ساده دلی
جان دلارای غزل، جسم شکیبای زنم

My soul seems soiled? You are seeing
yourself
I am your mirror, will shatter once you cast
a stone

زشت است اگر سیرت من خود را در او می نگری
هیهاکه سنگم زنی آئینه ام می شکنم

از جای برخیزم اگر پرسایه ام ببینم
بر خاک بنشینم اگر فرش ظریفم چمنم

I am an ancient willow, cast a full shadow
once I arise
Seated on good earth, I am a fine carpet, a
meadow of green grass

یک مغز و صد بیم عسس فکر است در چار قدم
یک قلب و صد شور هوس شعر است در پیرهنم

Under my scarf a single brain filled with
Fears of the patrol
Do not axe me at the root, it would be such a
shame
In your parched land, I am the greenery, the
deep-rooted oak

ای جملگی دشمن من جز حق چه گفتم به سخن
پاداش دشنام شما آهی به نفرین زنم

انگار من زادمتان کژتاب و بدخوی و رمان
دست از شما گر بکشم مهر از شما بر نکنم

انگار من زادمتان ماری که نیشم بزند
من جز مدارا چه کنم با پاره جان و تنم

What have I done to make you my foe, but
speak the truth
No response to your foul words, not even a
curse

هفتاد سال این گله جا ماندم که از کف نرود
یک متر و هفتاد صدم گورم به خاک وطنم

(«یک متر و هفتاد صدم»، یکی مثلاً این که...، 1998)

I imagine I have brought you forth, coarse,
uncaring, uncouth
I may abandon you, but I cannot stop loving
you

I have brought you forth snakes that bite me
What can I do with fruits of my own body
and soul?
Inside my dress a heart full of passions,
poems of desire

So I will have my plot, my grave, my one
meter seventy.
I have lived and lingered in this spot for
seventy years imagine

The poem sits well in the tradition of *mofakhereh* in Persian poetry, one's enumeration of one's own personal virtues in the face of an enemy. In this case, a real life-event instigated the poem, besides, that is worth recounting to point to the basis of topicality in a whole strand of Behbahani's poems. In 1998 shortly after the election of Mohammad Khatami to the presidency, as the possibility of a thaw between the state and the intellectual community began to show forth, the government-owned and operated concert hall known as *Talar-e Vahdat* organized an evening of poetry reading and speeches by the country's best-known poets and writers in which Simin was also an invited speaker. As she began to speak, recounting government-imposed restrictions on freedom of writing and publishing, she also reminded the audience of the fate of Ali-Akbar Sa'idi-Sirjani, a poet, fiction writer and scholar who had died in prison some four years previously. At this point, reports indicate, her microphone was disconnected, in all likelihood by the security forces present on the scene. She then began to speak at the top of her lungs but soon the curtain was pulled down, separating her from the audience. She then advanced to the forefront of the stage where she could be seen and heard once again. Finally, a group of young people, most probably functionaries of the state security forces, reportedly climbed the stage, manhandling her and pushing the seventy-year-old poet off the platform. By now the crowd was pretty much into the action shouting and yelling at those who were assaulting her and starting anti-government slogans, causing the whole ceremony to end in a fiasco.

The poem is Simin's answer to that event. In it, she starts by making an image of her words standing tall in the face of a hostile crowd, calling herself one meter seventy, which is her approximate height of Iran's poetry, the soul of what is still most pure and simple in that society, and the patient embodiment of female presence in it. She then begins recalling how the country's official state-controlled press has implied in referring to her as *sha`ereh-ye ma`rufeh*. It is after this line that her *mofakhereh* comes to the fore. She not only returns the demeaning insult she has received in the clause "*khod ra dar u minegari*," (you are seeing yourself), but claims in effect that the insult befits those who have called her by such names. She then digs deep into the lexicon of classical Persian poetry to find the ultimate reference to the breaking of a mirror out of spite just because it reveals the viewer's own face, or in this case *sirat* (character). She also makes an oblique reference to the tribal custom of stoning as punishment which has at times been doled out to adulteresses.

In the three lines that follow, the speaker then likens herself to a series of beautiful images of vegetation, growth and abundance. She is an old willow that casts a protective shadow, an ancient green oak that is magnificently beautiful, and, at the same time, a delicate lawn that carpets the ground, before turning once more to the theme of the enemies wishing to annihilate her, asking them to spare her their axe. The line that stands out most striking in this part of the poem is the one in which she also displays her mastery of the contrasting approach to contrarian portrayals, one of the most exacting sets of the struts and beams that make up the foundation of image-making in classical Persian poetry. Here's the line:

Under my scarf a single brain filled with fears of the patrol
Inside my dress a heart full of passions, poems of desire

The line also shows the limitations of my translation – perhaps all translation – in the face of such masterful artistry. In the original Persian the *yek* (one) in contrasts with the *sad* (one hundred) is the ultimate use of the *vahdat-and-kesrat* (unity and multitude) device as terms of contrasting comparison. At the same time, a brain hidden behind the scarf and a heart hidden in the folds of a dress make clearly derogatory references not only to the mandatory hejab in the Iran of the Islamic Republic but also to the obstacles on the display of heartfelt emotions by women, especially when it comes to the emotion we call love. In short, in its internal operations the line rivals the best in craftsmanship that classical Persian poetry can feature; the one that comes closest to my mind is Khaqani's in his famous *qasida* on visiting the Madayen ruins in Tisiphone, where one line has us compare the single advice inscribed on a king's crown to a hundred pieces of advice hidden in the long-rotten brain inside a dead king's skull:

Yek pand-e kohan budi bar taj-e sarash payda
Sad pand-e now ast aknun dar maghz-e sarash penhan

One ancient word of wisdom was once visible on his crown
One hundred new words of wisdom are now hidden in his brain

To return to Simin's poem, we then get a glimpse of the long way she has come from such images that of a mother poisoning her child inadvertently because she wish to wreak vengeance on her husband's rival wife or of the prostitute lamenting her sorry condition. What we have here is a woman who is pondering what she should do with those who show their enmity but in the end can be like her own son. It is a quandary that does not lend itself easily to venting a few names in response or in any other way reciprocating their disrespecting conduct. They are in the end her sons by virtue of being her fellow countrymen, and so all she can say is that she will not stop loving them even if it comes to her wishing to have nothing to do with them: "I may abandon you, but cannot stop loving you". This is the posture that few can assume or has articulated in response to the transgressions of the Iranian state at the present time. The poem closes on one final note of steadfastness without, literally, giving any ground to those very men who consider her their existential enemy:

I have lived and lingered in this spot for seventy years
So I will have my plot, my grave, my one-meter-seventy.

And as we know, happily for her, she stood her ground to the end and gained her grave at home, just as she had wished. There remains only a couple of more points to make to end tonight's talk. First, now that Simin Behbahani has joined the ranks of the seven-thousand-year-olds and her poetry is awaiting the judgment of time, we can say with some certainty that, most visibly, she can be credited with breathing new life into the Persian *ghazal* and, by extension, into all the verse forms associated with the classical tradition in that aesthetic system. The reason for this is that both Simin and the poetry of her time have outgrown the war between the old and the new, as two irreconcilable opposites. So, as we witness a new flourishing of the Persian *ghazal* and *qasida*, we should bear in mind that much of its new vitality is to be credited to Simin's work. As a result, we will probably no longer evaluate the poetry of such poets as *Ebtehaj* and *Shafi'i-Kadkani's* as something between the old and the new simply on account of its verse form. Secondly, in relation to the trio of *Parvin*, *Forugh* and *Simin*, we will in all

likelihood become more and more mindful of the fact that the astonishing brilliance that has made Forugh Farrokhzad one of the most dazzling poets of all time in Persian poetry and rightly so, has unfortunately also caused us somehow to undervalue Parvin E'tesami's poetry simply because the verse forms in which she has written, Parvin need not be assessed in accordance with any other criteria but those of her own talent and time. To me at least, *Farrokhzad's* astounding brilliance should not cast a shadow on Parvin or of Simin, who remain among the brightest stars of Persian poetic skies in the past century or so.

Let me end tonight's talk on a personal note. I have known Simin Behbahani for over thirty years; she has been a close friend and a constant source of poetic nourishment in my life, and I have written rather extensively on her. I read almost every line of every poem of hers one more time in preparation for tonight's talk, both as a collection that will never to be added to, unfortunately, and also in order to have a sense of each work in relation to the others. I clearly see that, more than anything else, that Simin was driven forth by love in all its manifestations. She was a beautiful woman and many men sought her company. She also had her own notion of love and its place in our modern world; in fact, I would dare say that it is this view of love that informs everything that she has written including those of her compositions which seem to have nothing to do with the theme of love. Most of all, Simin loved life itself, as it ought to be clear from her work. But it was a peculiar form of love and I am still trying to find a way of articulating that peculiarity. One thing I know is that she was a quixotic figure in the best sense of that word.

I had a dream about her last week, as I had begun to work on this talk. As she was stood on her grave, she began to whirl faster and faster, eventually to turn into something that looked to me like a windmill. As I woke up I immediately recalled a 1970s American song titled "In the Windmills of Your Mind", which had first appeared in a film by that name. It is a haunting song with some witchy lyrics, including "a circle in a spiral" and "a wheel within a wheel", "a snowball down a mountain and an apple whirling silently in space", "a tunnel that you follow to a tunnel of its own down a hollow to a cavern where the sun has never shone", "keys that jingle in your pocket" and "words that jangle your head", and "pictures hanging in a hallway" and "half remembered names and faces". In other words, the song features a series of half-remembered memories wrapped in moving images that stir the mind, haunt you to your wit's end, and evoke a sense of mystery in a constantly changing world around us and force us to love the world so filled with so much wonder. Simin too loved the wonders of this world, felt deeply for it and for us. We are all lucky indeed to be able to read her words to our children.

Thank you.