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AHL-E ḠARQ

AHL-E ḠARQ (The drowned, 1990), best-known novel of Moniru Ravanipur (Moniru Ravānipur, b. Bušehr, 1954), noted Persian novelist and short story writer of the second half of the 20th century.

Ahl-e ḡarq, like many of Ravanipur's works of fiction, is set in Jofra, a remote village in the Persian Gulf region, and is inspired by local myths and legends. Specificities of the geographical landscape and cultural traits of southern Iran are reinforced by the regional dialect of the novel. The novel is hailed as one of Persia's first works of magical realism, a literary mode that has found appeal in many regions of the world and has enjoyed substantial popularity in post revolutionary Persian fiction (Rahimieh, p. 61-62; Yavari, 1997, p. 588; Yazdanfar, p. 50).

Initially, Jofra's denizens live in near-isolation and draw on the sea for their livelihood. The sea is also the source of inexplicable and supernatural phenomena. The people believe to be at the mercy of Bu Salma (Recorded as Bu Salāma in Ḡolām-ḤosaynSāʿedi, *Ahl-e hawā*, p. 107), an evil sea spirit in Persian Gulf legends, who once in a while entices a young fisherman and requires him to undertake impossible tasks in exchange for a prized pearl he has hidden in the mouth of a fish. The young man's inability to survive under water for as long as it takes to fulfill Bu Salma's demands leads unfailingly to his death. Like many young men before him who have been recruited into Bu Salma's service, he joins the ranks of the drowned, inhabiting an underwater

realm also populated by mermaids and spirits.

The mermaids, too, suffer Bu Salma's wrath and occasionally flee the evil spirit, come ashore, and seek refuge among the women of Jofra. By lending their bodies to the mermaids and allowing themselves to undergo metamorphosis, the women of Jofra rescue the mermaids and, in turn, gain access to the realm of the sea where they hope to find the loved ones they have lost to Bu Salma. However, the women's entry into the world of the drowned fishermen does not free them from the memory of the lost souls.

The only villager capable of moving freely between the terrestrial and the fantastical realm of the drowned is Mah Jamāl, a young man with unique abilities, whose mother is a mermaid. He successfully completes a journey under the sea, escapes the clutches of the evil spirit, and learns that the drowned men continue in a form of existence in the submarianian world.

Communication between the two realms of the village and the sea is non-verbal and draws on both the emotional and the intuitive. Harmony between the villagers and the inhabitants of the sea is upset when outsiders who do not observe the beliefs of the locals arrive on the scene. The newcomers bring with them unfamiliar objects and news of political strife suggestive of the events surrounding the 1979 revolution. The chaos that overtakes the life of the village and the country claims Mah Jamāl as victim and ultimately a hero of the revolution. As the villagers adjust to new ways of life, their unique relationship to the sea and its supernatural inhabitants becomes less central in the narrative.

The second part of the novel turns from the depiction of life in Jofra to the revolutionary upheaval that engulfs the country in the 1970s. While the first part exhibits broad features of magical realism, the second half is firmly grounded in realism, contrasting sharply with the fantastic and supernatural aura of the first part. This devolution into realism tips the balance away from the novel's earlier naturalization of supernatural events and beings (Falaki, p. 896; Yavari, 1991, p. 640). The balance between the fantastic and the real, which had been maintained in the earlier part of the novel, becomes more precarious towards its end, and resolves the antinomy between the natural and the supernatural which is the cornerstone of magical realism, a mode of

writing based on the co-existence of two contradictory levels of reality and the narrative voice's treatment of both as equally credible. The imbalance has led some critics to highlight the novel's structurally uneven relationship to the genre of magical realism (Bahārlu, p. 69; Yusofi, pp. 57-58), and draw comparisons between Ravanipur and Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Daryābandari, p. 29, Sarkui, p. 30-32), the Colombian novelist and Nobel laureate, whose name is linked indelibly to magical realism.

It seems, however, that reading *Ahl-e ġarq* for traces of influence from contemporary magical realist writers is a less productive means of engaging with the novel than appreciating it as a narrative that experiments with fusing elements of local folklore with techniques of realism, an apt mode for conveying realities that evade the conventions of rationality (Talattof, p. 156). This organic fusion also highlights the absurdity of differentiating so-called real events from local myths and legends and, in turn, subverts modern Western assumptions about its own categories of verisimilitude and logic.

Ravanipur's interest in the fables and folklore of the littoral region of Iran is evident in her *Afsānahā va bāvarhā-ye jonub* (Stories and Legends from the South, 1990), a compilation of legends of the Persian Gulf region. *Ahl-e ġarq*, in line with classical Persian maritime narratives, presents the reader with a wealth of sea-related allegories and archetypes, and highlights the wondrous aspects of coastal area reality: a reality that is often overlooked by the first generation of regional writers, both those native to the region, such as Ṣādeq Čubak (Bušehr, 1916-98), and Aḥmad Maḥmud (also known as Eʿtāʾ, Ahvāz, 1930-2002), or those who traveled to the region and penned their travel accounts, including Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad (Tehran, 1923-68) and Ġolām-Ḥosayn Sāʿedi (Tabriz, 1935-85). In most of these writers' narratives, fictional or otherwise, the southern ports and islands are stripped from their rich cultural heritage, and are populated instead by displaced persons, who gripped by utter destitute and trapped in the dead end of tradition, suffer from the adverse consequences of oil, technology, and development. The stark portrayal of the circumstances of life in the region is developed into a recurrent motif and has appeared in the works of many writers who succeeded them.

Ravanipur's distinct contribution to regional writing in Iran, however, is the inclusion of sea-related myths, legends, and allegories in the predominantly

sober climate of the modern literary canon (ʿAlizāda, p. 30; Daryābandari, p. 29). The choice of Jofra as the locale for the novel, an idyllic habitat with mythical overtones, populated by the most articulate interpreters of the sea in modern Persian literature, has further enabled the author to capture the clash of contradictory realities which have swept the region in its transition from a situation of equilibrium between the land and the sea to a situation marked by urban primacy. In its journey to linkage with the rest of the nation, Jofra relives the latest chapters of Iranian history (Yavari, 1997, pp. 564-65). The English translation of the novel by Mohammad Reza Ghanoonparvar is forthcoming.

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