Published: January 21, 2011
Last Updated: October 10, 2016

ĀYENAHĀ-YE DARDĀR

ĀYENAHĀ-*YE* ***DARDĀR*** (Mirrors with cover doors, Tehran, 1992), one of the last major works by Hushang Golshiri (see GOLŠIRI, HUŠANG) renowned novelist and literary critic.

Āyenahā-ye dardār resembles a travelogue. It begins with the narrator's arrival in London airport and ends, after visiting several European countries, with his return flight to Iran from Paris. It is a third-person narrative told from the point of view of its protagonist, Ebrāhim, an Iranian writer who recreates his trajectory mainly through writing about the process of writing, a technique Golsiri has employed in some of his previous work, including his second novel *Kristin o Kid* (1971), an autobiographical fiction, in which the process of narration is treated as a part of the narrative (Yavari, p. 587).

The narrator of *Āyenahā-ye dardār* recounts Ebrāhim's travels to several cities and retells parts of the stories he has read to different Iranian communities residing abroad, and in turn appropriates elements of exilic literature (Khorrami, pp. 85-98; Mirābedini, III, pp. 958-59). In one of his trips Ebrāhim meets Ṣanam Bānu, the alluring woman he has loved since his early adulthood, and the feminine image that has appeared in almost all the stories he has written (Kalāntari, p. 32-33).

The encounter revives shared memories (*Āyenahā*, pp. 35-37) while adding another layer to the narrative in the making. In an overwhelming conversation with Ṣanam Bānu in her apartment in Paris, Ebrāhim recounts, once again, the story of his wanderings through time and across lands in

search of a place he can call home; a sisyphean attempt to reach an ever-fleeting Ithaca. It is after this conversation, in which he repeatedly expresses his frustrations with the inadequacy of words, their slippages of meaning, and the overall inability of language to circumscribe or enclose the experience in a word or a phrase, that he talks of his conviction to be a writer and of his decision to return to Iran, or rather, to a home he tries to discover in the language of his stories (*Āyenahā*, p. 148; see also, Mialni, p. 860).

Āyenahā-ye dardār functions on three narrative layers. The first two layers are distinguished by the narrator's treatment of time as remote past, on the one hand, and near past, on the other. The remote past is created through the reading of stories he has written long ago, full of reminiscences about the protagonist's childhood and youth. The narrative layer of the near past is evoked through the narrator's description of Ebrāhim's trip and his conversations with different characters, especially Ṣanam Bānu. The third layer that underscores the narrator's state of mind in the process of writing is suggested, more or less implicitly, through occasional references to events and conversations that have transpired during Ebrāhim's journey.

Every element and major theme appears in at least three versions, implying a lack of absolute, and questioning the existence of a single reality and its definition as an ensemble of unchangeable elements. "Who was he?" a question referred to at the beginning of the novel (*Āyenahā,* p. 6), which clearly refers to the issue of identity in the story's general context, is brought under scrutiny either directly by the narrator, or through the stories he either reads to his audience (the remote-past narrative), or recalls through his conversations with other characters in the story, notably Şanam Bānu (the recent past narrative). The mere presence of these multiple layers creates a structural void that subverts any grand narrative on such questions as "Who I am?" or "Where am I from?"

The process of problematizing reality does not end here, and these three narrative layers interact with each other through various literary devices, providing new possibilities for the interpretation of the same reality, and rendering it as always elusive, fluid, unstable and obscure . The most significant of these devices are mirrors with door, which not only reveal images, but also possess the ability to conceal them. The mirrors are not just "disinterested" neutral items, which merely reflect objects with no texture on a two-dimensional surface. They are not just metaphors either. In fact, their real significance is better understood when they are considered as an integral

part of the novel' s house. Mirrors—and story/mirrors—are placed in different locations of the novel's building and, strangely, show things, which are seemingly incompatible with the reality outside the mirrors. The existence of mirrors and their capacity to keep infinite faces and images, along with infinite reflections of images on each other and, by extension, on anything outside-the-mirrors, creates such a chaos that one feels as if one is walking through a large hall of mirrors filled with innumerable human beings and objects, and that the distance between the real and the unreal has dwindled to a minimum, and that there is neither an absolute real nor an absolute non-real. The creation of this chaotic house, which is based exclusively on Golshiri's skillful manipulation of the narrative form, highlights one of the major themes of the novel; namely the narrator/protagonist's futile journey of self realization (Kalāntari, pp. 30-37; Oḵovvat, pp. 244-55).

The visible gravitation of *Āyenahā-ye dardār* toward autobiography, and the narrator/protagonist's portrayal of the quotidian life of Iranian exiles as inconsistent with their previous convictions, along with his occasional reference to protracted discussions among exiled leftists regarding topics such as communism, proletarian government, prospects for a socialist revolution, and other staple topics of leftist discourse, has led some commentators to turn against the ideological proclivities of the author/narrator and consider his characterizations as imprecise, inadequately grounded and poorly contextualized (ʿAli Ašraf Darvišiān and Reżā Ḵandān, pp. 84-88). Such objections may appear justified at first glance. The very summary treatments, however, could be read as indicative of the narrator's low estimation of such conversation. That a fuller and more meaningful discussion of each one of these topics would require several tomes notwithstanding, the superficiality and absurdity of these conversations are highlighted by the very pithiness of the discussion they occasion in Golsiri's novel. Rather than signaling his arrogance, or his desire to stand above the fray, and in this manner augment his own standing and boost his own ideological authoritativeness, as some critics have argued (Šeydā, pp. 215-36), however, the author's cursory treatment is a deliberate choice to bring to the fore the vacuousness of leftist political discourse prevalent among Iranians at home and in exile.

Other critics, however, have approached *Āyenahā-ye Dardār,* more as a work of fiction than a political commentary. To provide a general picture of the novel's aesthetics, they have either resorted to genre theories (Barāheni, 1993, pp. 74-79) or have examined the intricate and complicated structure of the

novel and Golshiri's innovative use of literary techniques (Khorrami, 2003, pp. 85-107; Anṣāri). The genuinely democratic aesthetics of Golshiri, as commented by a critic, invites his readers to be a part of the republic of imagination and play an active role in affording meaning to a complex work of fiction (Milani, p. 861).

Āyenahā-ye Dardār, as a robust specimen of 20th century Persian fiction, successfully creates a self-replicating structure that challenges the notion of a singular reality. As part of its modernist strategy, it questions grand narratives and their absolutist notions of strictly demarcated objective and subjective spaces, and other elements comprising that reality.

Āyenahā-ye dardār is translated into Arabic by Salim Abdol-Amir Hamdan as *Marāyā al-d̲āt* (Cairo, 2003). His translation of Golshiri's *Šāzdeh Eḥtejāb*, entitled *Al-Amir Eḥtejāb* was also published in Cairo in 2004.

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