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AZADARAN-E BAYAL

ʻAZADARAN-E BAYAL (*ʿAzādārān-e Bayal*; The mourners of Bayal, Tehran, 1964; Figure 1), a collection of short stories by Ḡolām-Ḥosayn Sāʿedi (see SA'EDI, Gholam-Hosayn; 1936-1985), the prolific engagé writer of drama and fiction.

The collection comprises eight interconnected stories, called *Qeṣṣa*. Sharing characters and not unlike a novel (ʿOmrāni, p. 81; Stodte, p. 163-64), they revolve around the inescapable horrors of death, disease, drought, and famine in a fictitious village named Bayal. In the first story, the wife of Bayal's headman (see KADḴODĀ) is sick. Eslām, owner of the only cart in the village, who along with the kadḵodā appears in all the stories, escorts them and their adolescent son, Ramażān, to a roadside wherefrom they hitchhike to a hospital in the town. Although the doctor immediately prognoses death, Kadḵodā tells Ramażān that she is at another hospital. Refusing to leave without her, Ramażān stays behind with the hospital porter for one week. The more he misses his mother the louder and closer the mysterious sounds of bells, that he has heard ringing from afar throughout the story grow (Purnāmdāriān & Sayyedān, p. 53). When he opens the door he sees his mother and the wind takes them away. The first qeṣṣa is translated by Paul Losensky as "Mourners of Bayal," in Mansour Heshmat Moayyad, ed., *Stories from Iran: A Chicago Anthology*, Washington, D.C.,1991, pp. 289-307.

In the second story an ailment has taken over the village. Bayal's sage, Āqā is among the dead and the villagers send for the sage of the neighboring village to perform the rituals of burial. The ailing sage, however, dies of the same

disease, leaving villagers in mourning over Āqā's bloating corpse.

Eerie nocturnal winds scatter burial rags upon Bayal in the third story. The village is swept by famine and the villagers go to neighboring areas and beg for food. Old women perform superstitious rites, and display religious paraphernalia, in hopes of salvation from calamities, which soon afflicts surrounding villages as well.

The fourth qeṣṣa chronicles the dreary life of Mašd (Mašhadi) Ḥassan, whose cow, the only valued possession in his life, dies while he is away. In denial, Ḥassan identifies himself as his cow—mooing, even eating grass and alfalfa. Dragged to the city for treatment, he dies en route to the hospital. The story was later adapted as a screenplay for a film entitled *Gāv* (The Cow, 1969), directed by Dāriuš Mehrjuʾi. The movie's ominous tone, enhanced by black and white cinematography, presented an unflattering sketch of Iran's countryside (Sadr, p. 131), and the peasants' utter estrangement from the life of the country's burgeoning urban centers (Oskuʾi, pp. 741-42). Cow, as depicted by Sa'edi in the screenplay, joins such animal figures in modern Persian literature as Hedayat's *Sag-e velgard* (see HEDAYAT, SADEQ) and Behrangi's *Māhi-e siāh-e kučulu (see* BEHRANGĪ, ṢAMAD), "who challenge Iranians to think about the nature of their social ties and to contemplate on both internal and external sources of illness, decay and alienation." (Fischer, p. 214) "The film's subtexts endow it with depths of meaning that can otherwise be found only in the rich textures of great Persian poetry." (Akrami, p. 574; see CINEMA in Persia)

The movie was an immediate success, both in Iran and abroad, and won the Critic's Award in the Venice Film Festival (1971). ʿEzzat-Allāh Enteẓāmi's debut performance in the film earned him the Golden Hugo Award for the best actor in the Chicago International Film Festival in 1971. The story is translated into several languages, including German ("Die Kuh," tr., Maryam Parwisi-Berger, in F. Behzad, J.C. Burgel, G. Herrmann, eds., *Moderne Erzlähler der Welt:* Iran, Tübingen, Germany & Basel, Switzerland, 1978, pp. 208-32; and "Die Kuh," tr., Martina Paduch, in B. Alavi, ed., *Die beiden Ehemanner: Prosa aus Iran,* East Berlin, 1984, pp. 305-30). The English translation of the screenplay by Mohsen Ghadessy appeared as "The Cow," in *Iranian Studies* 18, 1985, pp. 257-323.

In the fifth story a young villager called ʿAbbās reluctantly bonds with an old, maimed dog that follows him home. Despite Kadḵodā and Eslām telling villagers to let him be, they condemn the attachment and finally conspire to

kill the dog, sending ʿAbbās into a homicidal rage. Jabbār, in the sixth story sees a large box outside Bayal and leads villagers to retrieve it. The villagers, because of a sobbing sound it emanates, enshrine and adorn the box with religious paraphernalia to harness its healing and blessing (see EMĀMZĀDA). The arrival of trucks with an American, who orders soldiers to seize the box and Jabbār, leaves the villagers in mourning over the loss. A slightly shortened version of the sixth qeṣṣa, translated into English by Karim Emami and illustrated by Morteza Momayyez, appeared as *The Mourners of Bayal in Kayhan International*, May 31, 1965, p. 6.

In the seventh story, a boy suffers inexplicable insatiability and ultimately undergoes an animalistic metamorphosis. Villagers lock the boy in a mouse-infested mill with rations, from which he escapes. Then they abandon him outside several neighboring villages from which he is expelled. Finally Eslām forsakes him in the city, wherein, rodent-like and eating filth, he becomes a spectacle.

Sa'edi's macabre portrayal of Bayal and its ill-fated inhabitants acquires a climatic tone in the eighth story when false rumors force Eslām to leave Bayal and migrate to the city, where he becomes a spectacle, roaming the streets, singing and playing music as he approaches an asylum (alternatively, a hospital in the revised edition).

Informed by Sa'edi's travels across the country, *ʿAzādārān-e Bayal* offers an ethnographic portrayal on diet, intimacy, language, religion, and architecture in rural Iran (Āl-e Aḥmad, pp. 481-82; Behrangi, p.104-06; Mirʿābedini, p. 113; Dabashi, p. 112; Stodte, p. 163). The village life in the collection, however, is not cast as a utopian alternative, but is used as a "projective screen on which problems can be defamiliarized and explored in a powerful fictitious surrealism." (Fischer, pp. 161-62; see also ʿOmrāni, p. 92-93). The publication of the collection, despite some criticism of informality (Barāheni, p. 438) and supposedly ungrammatical elements in his prose (Ebrāhimi, pp. 531-37), won Sa'edi high critical acclaim (Jamšidi, p. 148; Stodte, p. 170).

The easy blend of real and fantastic in *ʿAzādārān-e Bayal,* like several other stories of Sa'edi, has inspired critics to hail the collection as an early instance of magical realism in Iran (Mirʿābedini, pp. 113-14; Bahārlu, pp. 299-317; Qavimi, pp. 77-102; Maʿrufi, p. 5; Šāmlu pp. 21-24), a literary mode that has found appeal in many regions of the world with the publication of *A Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), by the Colombian novelist Gabriel Garcia Marques.

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