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BĀMDĀD-E ḴOMĀR

BĀMDĀD-E ḴOMĀR (The Morning After, 1995), the first, and vastly popular, novel by Fattāna Hājseydjavādi (b. Ḵāzerun, 1945, FIGURE 1).

Encased by a frame story within which the main story is narrated, *Bāmdād-e ḵomār*, a love story with a moral lesson, is set in Tehran in the last decades of the 20th century. The frame story begins with a heated conversation between Sudāba, the university educated daughter of a pedigreed family, who has fallen in love with the son of an upstart family, and her mother, who is against this marriage, as is her father, on the grounds of cultural and class incompatibilities. As "a modern educated girl," Sudāba insists on her right to choose. It is here that her mother asks Maḥbuba (meaning beloved), her eighty years old sister-in-law, to intervene. Instead of exhorting her niece, one way or the other, Aunty Maḥbuba (ʿAmma Ḵānom), the daughter of an aristocratic family in the final years of the Qajar dynasty (1781-1925), chooses to tell the story of her own life.

The book's title, taken from a famous line by Saʿdi: *Šab-e šarāb nayarzad be bāmdād-e ḵomār* (The night of inebriation is not worth the morning of hangover), is perhaps the pithiest possible summary of Maḥbuba's life, who at the age of fifteen falls madly in love with an apprentice carpenter named, perhaps ironically, Raḥim, which means the compassionate. The passions aroused in the headstrong Maḥbuba by the sheer ardor and idealism of youthful love prove more than a match for her family's fierce resistance to a marriage that they consider imprudent. They finally relent without giving the newly wed their full blessing. Maḥbuba's father buys the couple a small house

and a small workshop for Raḥim, but forbids any contact between them and his family. Only Maḥbuba's nursemaid is allowed to visit her once a month to pass on the small stipend sent by her father.

Soon Maḥbuba's night of inebriation descends into a hellish morning of hangover. Raḥim begins to brutalize Maḥbuba who is unaccustomed to the harsh realities of being the wife of a working class man. Raḥim routinely denigrates her, forcefully takes away the stipend her father sends, comes home smelling of cheap whores and alcohol, and even beats her up. To make matters worse, Raḥim's foul-mouthed mother moves in. Between the two of them, Maḥbuba's life becomes an uninterrupted hell. She soon gives birth to a boy named Almās, an anagram of Eslām (Islam) in Persian script. By now Maḥbuba is so distraught that when she gets pregnant for a second time she has a back alley abortion that damages her uterus forever. In the midst of all that, her son, barely six years old, drowns. Her effervescent love has by now soured into a searing hatred. When Raḥim decides to sell the house and the workshop, whose deeds are under Maḥbuba's name, she runs away and returns home after seven years. With the help of her parents, she secures a divorce from her husband and later marries her cousin Manṣur, whom she had rejected earlier for Raḥim, even though Manṣur is already married and has two children. In the end, a maligned and infertile Maḥbuba is forced to settle for a pale copy of an original life that she had squandered by succumbing to the temptations of love and trespassing the borders that traditionally should not have been crossed. The story ends when the narrative of Maḥbuba's life reaches to its end, leaving it to the reader to imagine its impact on the possible courses that Sudāba's life may take in the future.

The publication of *Bāmdād-e ḵomār*, a highly complex novel that demands multiple readings (Najmabadi, p. 373), earned the author, unknown previously, an immediate popularity, and was regarded as "a turning point in the history of contemporary [Persian] literature" (G. Emāmi). Within a year it went through five prints, and was praised as an engaging novel that benefits from a rich, expressive and often lyrical language (Karimi-Hakkak, p. 448; Šāhroḵi). By 2006, it had reached its thirty eight printing and grossed more than three hundred thousand copies, a number that has been since surpassed by newer printings. Given the habit of circulating books among friends and kin which may take a popular book to half a dozen or more readers, and the business of book rentals, it would not be far fetched to put the readership of the novel, predominantly women (Ferdowsi, p. 658; Najmabadi, p. 371), well

into the millions. In a survey of 500 students conducted on thirteen university campuses in Tehran (1999-2000), *Bāmdād-e ḵomār* ranked first among female students and fourth among their male classmates (Šahriyāri). It should be noted that, according to statistics released by the Data Bank of Ḵāna-ye Ketāb, in the 14 years preceding 2006, the three best-selling novels were written by Nāzi Ṣafavi, Zoyā Pirzād, and Fattāna Hājseydjavādi, female novelists, and the novels that brought them such a success dealt with women and their world (Iranian Students News Agency).

The unprecedented popularity of the novel, regarded by a critic as a "vulgar and fanatical story with a very ordinary and common plot (Kabiri, p. 63), and often deridingly referred to as "crowd pulling," (*ʿĀmma-pasand,* Ḥaqšenās, p. 34), or a novel designed to appeal to women (*bānu-pasand*, K. Emāmi, p. 32), provoked critical attention and led some critics with sociological bent to scrutinize the socio-demographic factors that might have contributed to its immense readership, in particular Iran's youthful population and the recent rise of a female reading audience (Ferdowsi, pp. 657-8).

Bāmdād-e ḵomār, in contrast to many novels written in 1950s and 1960s, does not sanctify the popular myth of the period that the poor are honorable and good by virtue of being poor (Karimi-Hakkak, p. 469; Najmabadi; p. 370). Like some early historical novels, it idealizes a vanishing gentry, but instead of castigating the emerging bourgeoisie as villains, it is the working and lower classes who are portrayed here as rapacious and self-centered (Yavari, p. 508). Many critics found what they referred to as the class snobbery of the novel problematic, arguing that the oppositional treatment of the rich and the poor in the novel is not only a mode of description but also a system of evaluation whereby the former is used as a standard against which the latter is measured and ultimately debased (Dastḡeyb, p. 284-92; Aḡnami, pp. 47-48; Kabiri, p. 63; Karimi-Hakkak, pp. 467-9). As contended by a critic, *Bāmdād-e ḵomār*, in which the upper class woman is the initiator of the love affair, goes against the "modernist novelistic tradition in which men of the upper classes could marry women of lower classes and uplift them in multiple senses." (Najmabadi, p. 370)

The perceived unjust treatment of the working class Raḥim and his mother provoked a novelist to write a counter-novel from the point of view of Rahim. The publication of the novel, entitled *Šab-e sarāb* (The Night of Delusion), written by Nāhid Pažvāk, a female pen name for a still unknown writer, resulted in litigation for its extensive use of dialogues from *Bāmdād-e ḵomār*.

However, not all commentators found the popularity of the novel as an indication of the worsening popular taste or a sign of class betrayal. Instead, greater stress was placed on the readers' capacity to receive the novel as an allegorical text, or rather, as a microcosm of an overall historical event. The life narrative of Maḥbuba, her headlong plunge into a marriage with Rahim, her subsequent brutalization, and her eventual return to her family, bruised and infertile, could be interpreted as Iran's experience with the revolution of 1979, and it's aftermath as the tale of a passionate love ending in a brutal betrayal (Ferdowsi, pp. 673-6). Disagreements notwithstanding, the debate over *Bāmdād-e Ḵomār* has advanced the level of writing about popular fiction in Persian, and has blurred the perceived distinctions as the "literary" (adabi) and the "popular" (mardom-pasand) in literature.

The German translation of the novel by Susanne Baghestani, entitled *Der Morgen der Trunkenheit* (Frankfurt, 2002), has already surpassed its seven prints, and has attracted both critical acclaim and wide readership.

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