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DERAḴT-E ANJIR-E MAʿĀBED

DERAḴT-E ANJIR-E MAʿĀBED (The fig tree of temples, 2000), the last and the highly acclaimed work of fiction by Ahmad Mahmud (Aḥmad Maḥmud, also known as Eʿṭāʾ; 1931-2002), prominent writer on rural and regional themes in modern Persian literature.

A novel in two volumes, *Deraḵt-e anjir-e maʿābed* recounts the life and the tragic end of an affluent family throughout the sixties and seventies in the oil rich region of southwestern Iran. Esfandiyār Āḏarpād, a middle age entrepreneur, his wife Afsāna, many years his junior, their children, and Āḏarpād's older sister, Tāj-al-Moluk, a very private woman, live a contended life in a stately mansion located near a large fig tree, whose origin and history was shrouded in mystery and legend, and from which the novel takes its title.

The story is set into motion when Āḏarpād dies unexpectedly and his wife marries his longtime friend and family lawyer, Mehrān Šahraki, who soon drives Afsāna and her eldest son, Farāmarz, the novel's central character, into addiction, and swindles the widow and her orphans of their vast inheritance, including the estate that Āḏarpād had so tastefully and lovingly put together. The daughter, Farzāna, afflicted by a terminal disease in her prime, ends her life by taking opium from her stepfather. Not long after, the wife falls ill and wastes away. Tāj-al-Moluk, having lost her home and her only means of support, is forced to become a boarder at the modest house of a shopkeeper in the same neighborhood, while her view is the remains of what once was an enviable estate. The revolving of the novel around the tale of a house brings it in line with a recurrent motif in post-revolutionary Persian fiction, featured in

such novels as *Ṭubā va maʿnā-ye šab* (Tehran, 1988) and *JEN-NĀMA* (Sweden, 1998), by Shahrnush Parsipur (Šahrnuš Pārsipur, b. 1945) and Houshang Golshiri (see GOLŠIRI, Hušang, 1938-2000), respectively (Mirʿābedini, 2001, p. 62).

Farāmarz, after completing a two-year sentence in jail on drug charges, assumes a fake identity and practices medicine without license in a small town near his birthplace. When betrayed, he skips the town and although assumed dead, reappears in the novel several years later. It does not take long for Mehrān Šahraki, however, to raze the villa and the surrounding gardens and establish the township of Deraḵt-e Anjir-e Maʿābed, with apartment complexes, an adjoining medical facility, a mosque, an entertainment center, as well as shops, and more.

The novel, which thus far reads like Mahmud's previous works, gradually departs from social realism, long identified with the writer (Talattof, p. 80; Naṣri, p. 428; Golširi, p. 58), and taking on a fictitious revolution in the township attains a fantastic overtone with allegorical imageries and dreamlike elements (Qarib, 2002, pp. 17-19; Solaymani, p. 68). Farāmarz, now disguised as a wandering dervish, returns to his birthplace, and relying on his intimate knowledge of the township, soon evolves into a fortuneteller in the mind of its inhabitants (Šarifi, pp. 629-31). Akin to the way that the voice of the mysterious dervish enthralls the people, the fig tree, already grown into a pilgrimage site, shoots up on every corner, spreads all over the town, blocking streets and alleys, doors to schools, libraries, offices, and public buildings (Nikbaḵt, p. 27). Farāmarz, obsessed with reinstating his lost family fortune, consumed by vengeance toward the impostor in a Hamletian state of mind (Mirʿābedini, 2001, p. 62), and empowered by the masses, all spellbound by his magic, foments an uprising against Mehrān Šahraki, and his enterprise.

Beneath the dramatic narrative of an outlandish and extraordinary incident, Mahmud's *Deraḵt-e anjir-e maʿābed* invokes unmistakable similarities to the 1979 revolution (Tadayon-Nežād, p. 3), curiously missing in his highly acclaimed social realist historical trilogy, *Hamsāya-hā* (The neighbors, 1974), *Dāstān-e yek šahr* (The tale of a town, 1982), and *Zamin-e suḵta* (The scorched earth, 1982), whose shared protagonist suffers along with the country as it undergoes fundamental transformations, in a span of thirty years, from the Moṣaddeq era, to the decades following the 1953 coup, and the long war with Iraq (Yavari, p. 586; Solaymāni, p. 327). In a moving scene of *Deraḵt-e anjir-e maʿābed*, the dervish reopens the town's library after its books, deemed

‘immoral’ and ‘anti-faith,’ have been replaced by volumes on the antiquated subjects of sorcery, the afterlife, and the rites of secret communities so that, “Not one single copy of old books or pamphlets could be found” (*Deraḵt-e anjir-e maʿābed*, p. 975).

Told by an omniscient narrator in present tense, *Deraḵt-e anjir-e maʿābed*, analogous to most of Mahmud’s stories is full of local color, and captures the idiom of ordinary people in short sentences (Mirṣādeqi, p. 167).Evocative of a *Bildungsroman*, it renders a critical account of the life of a man, and a transitional phase in the history of a town (Mirṣādeqi, p. 166; Solaymāni, p. 61), in which superstitions and miracles still occupy the center, and its landscape is marred by the ever budding branches of a fig tree that have crept into its every corner without facing much resistance (Qarib, 2001, p. 453).

Throughout the last pages of the novel, the rebellion reaches a disastrous crescendo, until the fateful moment when the statue of dervish’s archenemy, Mehrān Šhahraki, is toppled, and he is trapped in a fire, while fleeing the scene. In the last scene of the novel Farāmarz, while standing at the base of the statue and staring into the crowd, is recognized by the people around him.

As a turning point in Mahmud’s literary career (Mirʿābedini, 1987, pp. 931-32), *Deraḵt-e anjir-e maʿābed* is not only related in numerous ways to the realities of the world it embarks to portray, but also and more significantly, its abrupt ending amidst the action, delegates it to the reader to imagine the future course of events and afford meaning to Mahmud’s most complex work of fiction.

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