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JĀ-YE ḴĀLI-E SOLUČ

JĀ-YE ḴĀLI-E SOLUČ (Tehran, 1980; tr. Kamran Rastegar, *Missing Soluch*, 2007, FIGURE 1, FIGURE 2), Mahmud Dowlatabadi's (Maḥmud Dowlatābādi, b. 1940, FIGURE 3, FIGURE 4), celebrated novel. Dowlatabadi, along with Behazin (Maḥmud Eʿtemādzadeh), Sadeq Chubak, Ebrāhim Golestān, Aḥmad Maḥmud, and Gholam-Hosayn Sa'edi, is credited with expanding the topographical expanse of modern Persian fiction by choosing rural and provincial settings for their novels and short stories.

Published on the eve of the Revolution of 1979, *Jā-ye ḵāli-e Soluč* is set in Zeminej, a village on the desert's edge. References to nearby cities such as Sabzevār, along with the native patois, hint at the province of Khorasan as the probable home of Zaminej (Ahmadzadeh, p. 225). The novel details the quotidian drudgery that plagues the Iranian peasantry, as well as the impact of land reform on rural families of meager means. Loss and harsh fate are present from the novel's opening with the unexplained disappearance of Soluč. "Mergan raised her head from the pillow. Soluch was gone" (*Missing Soluch*, p. 7).

Although Soluč himself plays no direct role in the unfolding plot, the motif of his empty place hovers over the narrative, and the belief that he is still alive imbues the novel with an aura of suspense. Soluč's bewildered wife, Mergān, is left with three children, the eldest of whom is just over 15 years old. Financially strapped as a tenant farmer dependent on paltry occasional and seasonal work, Mergān's ability to eke out a meager subsistence is further reduced by the stigma of her unbroken ties to a man no longer present

(Navabpour, p. 245).

Remaining within the confines of social realism and laden with a bitter and tragic overtone (ʿAlāʾi, pp. 65), the novel follows a linear plot (Naṣr-e Eṣfāhāni, p. 191-96) and is narrated in the omniscient third-person voice. Dowlatabadi's deployment of that technique enables him to interfere in the course of the narrative, to upstage the characters with tedious moralizations, and to interrupt dialogues with long descriptive comments (Mirʿābedini, p. 864; Nafisi p. 995), which in turn, slows its flow (Ḥasanli, pp. 48-62) and burdens it with superfluous and protracted excursions (Barāheni, p. 207; Dastranji, p. 74).

Women—especially poignant in the case of Mergān and her thirteen-year–old daughter Hājar, who is married off to a greedy and predatory older man—are often depicted as desolate creatures subjected to men's unilaterally exercised power in the village (Gheytanchi). In Azar Nafisi's estimation, Mergān embodies many of the stereotypical traits of female characters in modern Iranian literature. They are patient and blessed with strength; their conflicts and paradoxes are primarily external, reflecting class conflict within their social milieu. Women characters are thus devoid of interiority, as well as individuality, and inner conflicts and contradictions (Nafisi, p. 995). Kamran Rastegar, in contrast, suggests that Mergān is convincingly endowed with a remarkable degree of internal complexity, embellished by a variety of literary devices (Rastegar, 2007b).

Reminiscent of Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad's *Nefrin-e zamin* (The curse of the land, Tehran, 1968) *Jā-ye ḵāli-e Soluč* is a scathing critique of the government's land redistribution scheme of the 1960s, which included as well the introduction of mechanized agriculture throughout the country (Hillmann, p. 15). The reforms brought to an end the patriarchal system of land ownership, but the longstanding traditions and connate values that prevailed in Iran's countryside remained outside its grasp. Mergān's bewilderment, as argued by another critic, bespeaks a wider social malaise, an identity crisis that has befallen a nation undergoing social transformation (Navabpour, p. 245).

The incongruity between immanent local beliefs and the new ones slowly seeping into the village is typified in Dowlatabadi's rendition of Mergān's two sons. The elder son, ʿAbbās, clings to the old pattern of village life and becomes a camel herder. The frightening scene of his entanglement with a crazed camel is meticulously captured by Dowlatabadi. "The camel grabbed at his shoulder. He shook his body in defense, but the camel's teeth continued gripping his

shirt and jacket. The flag of death was rising" (*Missing Soluch*, p. 313). Escaping from the camel, ʿAbbās jumps into an abandoned dry well. "He was circled by snakes. Desert snakes. If one was to breathe the fire of its breath at you, you'd be ashes" (*Missing Soluch,* p. 320). When finally rescued, he is but a shell of a man, mentally scarred and prematurely old with white hair and eyebrows.

In contrast to the traumatized ʿAbbās, his younger brother Abrāu, embraces the new opportunities and becomes an assistant to the driver of a newly arrived tractor. This job, however is short-lived, as the tractor driver, whose wages have not been paid, takes the engine to the city for repair and never returns, leaving the tractor with no engine and Abrāu with no job.

The conflicted encounter between the old and the new is also manifest in the installation of a mechanical water pump as an alternative to the old, labor intensive, but reliable, traditional underground irrigation channels (*qanāt*; see KĀRIZ). Before long, the new aggressive water collection mechanism results in the depletion of the water table, and the water pump is subsequently dismantled. But the *qanāt* has gone dry as well, clogged by the corpse of a camel. The battle between old and new, one in which the new supplants the old but fails to emerge as a viable substitute, leaves the parched lands of the village with no water supply. Those who are able to migrate depart for nearby cities in search of menial work, and those who stay, are trapped in unproductive and parasitic lives. "The symbolism is obvious: an old system which at least worked has been sacrificed for a new system which is ironically born dead" (Navabpour, p. 250).

The story is framed by two dawns. Soluč disappears mysteriously at the first dawn. The second dawn marks the departure of Mergān and Abrāu in search of a living and ill-prepared for what awaited them. ʿAbbās, no longer a virile teenager, is left behind, and eventually turns the family home into an opium den (Ahmadzadeh, p. 231; Čeheltan, p. 101).

The novel, reminiscent of the 3,000 pages long *Kelidar,* offers a wealth of information on the region's customs and traditions rendered in Dowlatabadi's accessible and yet poetical prose (Mirṣādeqi, p. 333). The English translation of the novel earned the praise of the critics as a "beautifully and incisively rendered," work of fiction (*Publishers Weekly*, 26 February 2007), and as a book that "makes a deep impression" and "reads like an ancient thing" (Haag-Higuchi, p. 112). The German translation of the novel by Sigrid Lotfi appeared as *Der leere Platz von Ssolutsch* in 1991, to critical acclaim (FIGURE 5).

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