JEN-NĀMA
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JEN-NĀMA (The book of jinn, Sweden, 1998), the last novel—and arguably the magnum opus—of Hushang Golshiri, the eminent novelist and literary critic.

Golshiri's fame as a writer of formidable talent was established with the publication of his first novel, *Šāzda Eḥtejāb* (Tehran, 1968; tr. Minoo Ramyar Buffington as "Prince Eḥtejāb" in Hillmann, ed., 1976, pp. 250-303) and continued to grow with the publication of over a dozen other acclaimed collections of short stories and novels; most notably, *Kiristin o Kid* (Christine and Kid, 1971) and *Āyenahā-ye dardār*. The writing of *Jen-Nāma* took more than thirteen years (1984-1997) and was first published in Sweden in 1998, possibly because it failed to receive publication permission in Iran (Sciolino, p. 248; Saghai).

In *Jen-nāma,* a largely autobiographical narrative, Golshiri offers a "harshly critical, defiantly frank, but ultimately compassionate image" (Milani, II, p. 860) of his life, intricately woven into the history of his city, and on a larger scale, his country. (For an autobiographical sketch of Golshiri, see his interview with Buffington in Hillmann, ed., 1976, pp. 245-50; see also Mirʿābedini, pp. 114-18.)

The novel consists of five chapters covering a time span of 21 years (1955-1976) in the life of its narrator/protagonist, Ḥosayn Makārem b. Maḥmud, the younger of two brothers in a working class family. The chapters are aptly called *majles*, while the two epilogues are called *takmala*. The first

takmala is composed by the narrator, while the composition of the second, which is left blank, is delegated to the reader. The opening chapter (Majles-e avval) is set in Abadan in southern Iran, and chronicles the childhood years of Ḥosayn, who, like Golshiri himself, spends the first years of his life in a working-class neighborhood, a workers' ghetto comprised of small, ramshackle concrete houses (Golshiri, 1991, p. 111-12; Mirʿābedini, p. 117).

After fewer than eighty of the novel's 537 pages, the story's locale shifts to the city of Isfahan (q.v.), with its old clay-and-mud-brick houses, its narrow alleys twisting under arched roofs, and its old-fashioned, traditional inhabitants, a people bearing the weight of thousands of years of history and superstition on their shoulders. Isfahan is the city that entices and finally possesses the teenager who, again like Golshiri himself, has returned to his ancestral home after spending the bulk of his childhood in the shadows of oil refinery smokestacks in Abadan. Golshiri's meditation on Isfahan's squalor and monotony, an affectionate and intricately detailed portrayal, comes to resemble James Joyce's treatment of Dublin in *Ulysses*; that is, Golshiri depicts the city of Isfahan as he would a fictional character. In addition, the dominance of tradition—especially that of religious belief mingled with folkloric superstition—is evident in both novels.

After finishing high school, Ḥosayn is employed as a clerk in a public registry office, where, from morning to night for many years, he records transactions and indexes files of property deeds, lease documents, and automobile titles. In the meantime, he also writes about members of his family, the people he works with, and, most significantly, those who have disappeared or who lived in the past. All this he describes as an effort to immortalize the past, to stop his world from revolving and turning upside down (*Jen-Nāma*, p. 268). He is obsessively engaged in strange practices akin to black magic and, emulating his either dead or disappeared uncle (also called Ḥosayn), attempts to approach the world of the occult and summon the souls of the dead (*Jen-nāma*, pp. 74, 193).

Ḥosayn's elder brother, Ḥasan, is a teacher and political activist who, in sharp contrast to Ḥosayn, believes in linear time, and advocates change. Although usually possessed by political ideologies and dreams that seem to drop from the sky, Hasan criticizes Ḥosayn for resorting to magic and other miraculous powers of the past, and for regarding mankind as the "jewel of creation" rather than the "great-grandson of the monkey" (*Jen-nāma*, p. 306).

Jen-nāma is an apt title for a novel full of possessed characters (*jenn-zadegā*n). Even the narrator suffers from some unnamed physical or psychological ailment (possibly epilepsy). Tormented by mysterious seizures, apocalyptic scriptures and occult texts, he soon develops (or perceives that he has developed) supernatural powers, such that he is made able to change the cosmic order, to stop the Earth from revolving, to save what remains worthy from the old ways, and to point fallen men toward salvation; all simultaneously, at one exact moment on 10 April 1976, coinciding with a solar eclipse that he himself has predicted (*Jen-nāma*, p. 422).

Jen-nāma is in some sense a *Bildungsroman*—the tale of a possessed protagonist and his country, a country in which the extraordinary and miraculous still occupy the center, and in which superstitious beliefs have been a major contaminating force. History, religion, poetry, science, art, and daily habits are all spheres influenced by superstition in the novel. As one critic has commented, the novel provides an insightful, critical, and compassionate rendering of an endemic messianic tendency lodged in the heart of monotheistic religious traditions, as well as its multifaceted reverberations in, and powerful grip upon, the Persian psyche (Kalāntari). The deeply rooted desire of the people to embrace a redeemer appears as a recurring motif in many of Golshiri's previous novels; most notably, *Maʿṣum-e panjom yā ḥadiṯ-e morda bar dār kardan-e ān savār ke ḵᵛāhad āmad* (The fifth saint, or the tale of the hanging dead body of the horseman that shall come, Tehran, 1979).

Jen-nāma, like most of Golshiri's works, is characterized by his innovative manipulation of narrative form, his skillful rendering of characters, his near-obsessive focus on external detail even while much of the significant action happens within the narrator's own mind (Yavari, p. 857), and finally, his extensive knowledge of classical Persian literature, and subsequently his talent for drawing on its rich repository of fictional tropes (Mandanipur, p. 51). Bewilderment in response to patriarchies of the past is a hallmark of Golshiri's fiction (Nafisi; ʿAzizpur).

Treating the process of writing as an integral part of the narrative is another signature trait of Golshiri's works (Ghanoonparvar, p. 352; Mirʿābedini, p. 117). Ḥosayn's conviction in his ability to read minds, his keen awareness of the transience of reality, his attempts to register all he sees and experiences, and his belief in the magical power of words to resurrect the dead, all serve as examples of Golshiri's notion of fiction and its power to immortalize the world

by bringing it under scrutiny. As one critic has said, Golshiri saw the realm of fiction as something sacred, experienced life only as a story, and seemed to treat the ultimate structure of the affective responses to the world as nothing but stories (Milani, II, p. 860-61).

Jen-nāma ends with a title page on which the words "Takmala-ye dovvom" appear, followed by several blank pages, implying a suspension of judgement. On the top of the first blank page appears a very brief sentence, which places the onus upon the reader to afford meaning to this complex work of fiction, to imagine an ending, to gaze into the heart of darkness, at the eyes of the jinn that Golshiri has spent years in summoning; and more importantly, to take a step forward in fulfilling his lifelong dream of sweeping the jinns away.

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