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SAMFONI-E MORDAGĀN

SAMFONI-e MORDAGĀN (Tehran, 1989, translated by Lotfali Khonji, as *Symphony of the Dead*, Wiltshire, UK, 2007), the first and most acclaimed novel by Abbas Maroufi (ʿAbbās Maʿrufi, b. Tehran, 17 May 1957), fiction writer and the founder and editor of the periodical *Gardun*. He left Iran for Germany in the spring of 1996 and has lived there since (FIGURE 1).

Samfoni-e mordagān (Ardabil, in northwestern Iran, in the years following World War II, and is the account of the last twenty-four hours in the life of Urhan Urkhani (Urhān Urḵāni); he and his brother Ideen (Āidin) are the last survivors of the Urkhani family. Jāber Urḵāni, a dried fruit wholesaler, and his wife had died after years of pain and suffering, and Ideen's twin sister, Idā, had committed suicide for unknown reasons. Urhan, the youngest sibling, had already killed one of his brothers, the multiply handicapped Yusef, and is obsessed with murdering Ideen, who was once a poet, and now, being poisoned by Urhan, has lost his sanity and wanders the dilapidated coffeehouses on the shores of Šurābi, a small salty lake near Ardabil.

The story unfolds on a terribly cold afternoon, when Urhan closes his store, takes a thick rope, and leaves for Šurābi to find Ideen and strangle him. In these last twenty-four hours, Urhan, venturing outside to find and kill Ideen, simultaneously sojourns internally and regresses chronologically into his own past, wearing himself out in order to rationalize the act of fratricide. Paralleling the way in which the past articulates through the theme, structure, and setting of the novel, voices from the dead fill the very last hours of Urhan's life. The novel ends with the tragic scene of his death in the salt lake, with the

rope close to his head, “so straight and so taut on the water surface that any passenger-by would think, “Oh, my God! A man has hanged himself in the water” (*Symphony of the Dead*, p. 267).

The novel not only lacks the singular voice of an omniscient narrator, but also freely switches between first and third person voices and shuttles back and forth in time. The employment of the technique allows Maroufi to furnish alternative perspectives for the same event and offers a space for the internal monologues of the fictional characters. Following a symphonic structure, it is composed in four movements. With the progression of the narrative, however, the structure favored by a symphony succumbs gradually to chaos, anxiety, and disorder, as exacted by death. The first movement is further broken down into two parts, the first appearing at the very beginning, and the latter at the very end, following the fourth movement.

Two cameras operate simultaneously in the first movement of the narrative and follow the story line concurrently from two different angles. The first camera registers Urhan’s journey to death on the coldest night the city has ever experienced, and the second camera accompanies him as he recalls memories from a life spanning forty-three years (Maroufi, 1989, pp. 275-89). By beginning the book with a verse from the Qurʾan which tells the story of Cain’s killing of Abel and hiding his body at the instructions of a raven, Maroufi loads Urhan’s murder of Ideen with biblical overtones (Yektā, pp.147-54).

The second movement of the novel is the only one that attains chronological order, following the Urkhani brothers from childhood to adulthood, from health to illness, from sanity to insanity, and from life to death. The technique of interior monologue, as appropriated by Maroufi in the third movement of the novel, has been praised as an innovation in modern Persian fiction (Qānunparvar, pp. 90-93; Behbahāni, pp. 53). He positions Surmelinā, Ideen’s beloved dead wife, in Ideen’s mind, and through her recital of Ideen’s interior monologue, we learn of his love for Idā and how devastated he felt after her suicide (Mahvizāni, p. 25).

In the fourth movement of the novel, reminiscent of Benji’s section in William Faulkner’s (1897-1962) *The Sound and the Fury* (Meqdādi, pp. 11-16; Bahārlu, p. 138), we listen to the non sequitur words and utterances that Ideen, unable to differentiate between past and present, remembers and enunciates. Recognition of the relationship between these disjointed fragments is only

possible through intimations provided in other chapters.

In the second part of the first movement, which appears at the end of the novel, while the two cameras are still registering Urhan's concurrent and diametrically opposed trips to the beginning and end, the relentless cries of ravens echo the tragic demise of Urhan, Cain's modern manifestation, who simultaneously, represents Abel, the slain. Death, symbolized by an acrimonious old man, encroaches upon the scene. The symphony culminates as a requiem.

The scenes, symbols, monologues, images, allusions, and structural devices of *Samfoni-e Mordagān*, along with the novel's desperate refrain—"The damage is irreparable"— collectively generate and convey emotions that are all centered on loss and deprivation (Dastgayb, pp. 139-41; Ḥosayni, p. 502). Maroufi's skillful appropriation of nature as the psychological landscape of the novel and the organic repository of Urhan's tensions, worries and anxieties, mirroring his tormented soul, marks a turning point in the history and development of modern Persian fiction (ʿAlāʾi, p. 23). Maroufi's choice of names for the novel's characters, such as Jāber (cruel) for the aggressive patriarch of the household, play a significant role in generating the macabre tone by which the novel is characterized (Yektā, pp. 133-46).

The publication of the novel won Maroufi instant fame and attracted wide critical interest both in Iran and abroad. It was praised as an innovative exercise in structure and technique to create meaning (Puri, pp. 43-46); as a masterful rendition of a family's story, whose deterioration is smoothly blended into the collective narrative of a traditional society confronted by Western technological and societal ethics (Ṣanʿati, p. 164; Tehrānčiān, pp. 38-39; Bahār, pp. 28-30); as a lyrical narrative on the life and sufferings of a prototypical accursed poet, whose life and art are outside or against the authoritarian establishment (ʿAlāʾi, p. 24); and as a novel informed by psychoanalytic concepts and theories, which rewards an inspiring testimony to the similarity of psychic and literary structures and the linguistic nature of mental processes (Yavari, 2007, pp. 18-23). Several critics, however, did not concur with the high applause of the admirers of the novel, criticized it for the improper grammar and diction (Bahārlu, pp., 137-41), and singled it out as a failed attempt in magical realism and an overt imitation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Vakili).

The English translation of the novel also drew critical acclaim (

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