



## SANG-E ŞABUR

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**SANG-E ŞABUR** (1966, tr. by Mohammad Reza Ghanoonparvar, as *The Patient Stone*, 1989), the last, and arguably, the most critically acclaimed work of fiction by **Sadeq Chubak** (Şādeq Čubak, 1916-1998), a noted Persian novelist and short story writer of the 20th century.

The story is set in a half-ruined house in Shiraz, where most of the novel's characters live as tenants: Aḥmad Āqā, a young school teacher and an aspiring writer; Gowhar, who prostitutes herself to support her son and ex-maid; Kākol Zari, Gowhar's little son who lives with his mother; Jahānsoltān, Gowhar's invalid ex-maid, who lays bedridden in the ruins of what used to be the house's stable; and Belqis (Ar. Belqeys), who occupies another room with her opiate and sexually incompetent husband. Belqis lusts after Aḥmad Āqā, who is in love with Gowhar. Seyfolqalam (Seyf al-Qalam), a secular moralist who wants to rid the world of the dangers of venereal diseases by murdering pimps and prostitutes, is the only central character that dwells alone in a separate house.

The novel lacks an omniscient narrator and is "narrated" by a cast of five characters who lend their names to chapter headings (Barāheni, p. 712; Nafisi, pp. 61-83; Ghanoonparvar, pp. 73-4). Gowhar, arguably the pivotal character of the story, is the only protagonist who is denied a chapter in the novel. Her tale is narrated by other characters (Nafisi, p. 68).

The novel gets its title from a widely known folk tale of the same name (Barāheni, p. 732; Mir'ābedini, p. 446; Markus, 1985, p. 235 and ff 42 p. 239),



that was published by Sadeq Hedayat, in *Majalla-ye musiqi* (Journal of Music, 1941). In that tale, the patient stone is the archetype of the most empathetic listener. It gathers in itself all the empathy that is expunged from the world. It is in the nature of the patient stone to sacrifice itself by bursting into pieces upon hearing that which otherwise would crush the one who bears the burden of an incommunicable sorrow. Denied the empathy of a patient stone, the five narrators of the novel, are all shut behind their granite loneliness.

The plot is set in motion when Gowhar disappears and Aḥmad Āqā is forced to become involved with the lives of his co-tenants, especially Kākōl Zari and Jahānsoltān, who die in quick succession following Gowhar's death. Faced with the senselessness of it all, Aḥmad Āqā is at the edge of a nihilistic abyss when the police call on him to identify Gowhar among the corpses of a dozen of Seyfolqalam's victims. The novel ends in Seyfolqalam's residence, with a three act "play" in which Mašia and Mašiāna, the archetypal man and woman in the Iranian myth of creation, murder Zurvan, the ancient Iranian God of infinite time, with the help of Ahriman, His nemesis. The novel begins and ends with two earthquakes: the first one affects Shiraz in 1934, and the second, brings the universe to an end.

The publication of the *Patient Stone* caused a great stir, attracting both warm reception and equally harsh criticism. In fact, it would be hard to find a Persian novel that has aroused such diametrically opposed judgments. It was praised by Parviz Nātel Kānlari, on the one hand, as Persia's best piece of fiction after Sadeq Hedayat's the *Blind Owl* (Elāhi, 1993, p. 265); by others as one of the most moving pieces of fiction in Persian language (Hillmann, p. 301; Ghanoonparvar, p. 206; Sepānlu, p. 391); and also as a novel with bold modes of expression that will open new horizons before Persian authors (Kamshad, p. 129); and as Chubak's magnum opus: a culmination of his entire literary production, in which many of the characteristics of his earlier work are displayed (Barāheni, pp. 696-8). On the other hand, some critics saw significant flaws in the techniques of narration and the structure of the novel, and found it "a pitiful attempt by a writer ... that has nothing to say" (Daryābandari, p. 389). The language of the novel, as in Chubak's earlier works, also aroused opposing judgments. It was appreciated by some critics as "the crowning achievement in reproducing spoken Persian on the printed page (Barāheni, pp. 661-662; Ghanoonparvar, pp. xiii-xiv). Other commentators found the 'obscene' language of the novel problematic, arguing that it has reduced the novel to a piece of pornographic literature



(Daryābandari, p. 279-89).

Moreover, the appearance of names as chapter headings led some critics to assume that the content of each chapter is solely based upon the ‘interior monologue’ of the respective character (Golširi, p. 249; Nafisi, pp. 61-8; Ghanoonparvar, pp. 74-97). Nafisi found the interior monologues of the characters too discursive to be attributable to the stream of consciousness (Nafisi, pp. 68-9). It should be noted, however, that while all chapters, except one, include larger or smaller chunks of some type of sub-vocal activity, they also include pieces that are happening outside the consciousness of the chapter’s narrator many of them conversations with other characters. The chapter titled Seyfolqalam, for example, includes a number of these dialogues that transpire externally. The extensive inclusion of materials, that cannot be characterized as interior monologues, inspired some critics to describe the novel as “a literary collage,” which shows interesting new developments in the techniques of narration (Yarshater, p. 55), and as “a long kaleidoscopic novel,” (Elwell-Sutton, quoted in Markus, p. 231). The chapter that clearly lacks any interior monologue is the chapter where Aḥmad Āqā is reading Ferdowsi’s *Šāh-nāma*. Chubak’s sharply edged criticism of the Iranian society and his pessimistic outlook regarding its future are well reflected in his choice of section from the *Šāh-nāma* depicting the final days of the Sasanian glory, which also reveal his latent nationalism and his laments for a bygone past (Yarshater, p. 55).

The traditional function of the patient stone in Persian lore, in dialogue with the techniques of the stream of consciousness, has turned each chapter of the book into a patient stone for the fictional character who lends his name to its headings. The reader, therefore, is presented with the ‘interior monologues’ of the characters, but also with their deeds and confessions, both interior and exterior. By the alchemy of this folkloristic device, the omniscient narrator, who usually presides over the text, is not so much side stepped as overthrown by a ‘clairvoyant listener’. Or, rather, the writer has done that which Persian folklore has always demanded of the patient stone: to hear the story of all of the creatures of this ‘fallen’ world to the point of self-implosion. Aḥmad Āqā, who had started conceiving thinking would sound better in this context of writing as an act of detached observation, is propelled by the relentless thrust of events that follow Gowhar’s disappearance to re-conceive it as empathetic authorial self-annihilation.

The device of the patient stone makes it also possible to identify the



concluding plays' symbolic function within the structure of the novel, which most commentators have found irritating (Modarresi, p. 167; Dastġayb, pp. 127-8; Jamālzāda, p. 164; Kāma-i, p. 306; Sepānlu, p. 383; Mir'ābedini, p. 444). In this light, these 'plays' could be interpreted as Aġmad Āqā's visions, refracted by the patient stone. At the novel's moment of denouement, the terrible story lines of the characters converge to expose the malevolence of the unifying principle of their worlds. The scene with the dead bodies strewn around, has the unmistakable quality of the Last Day, just before the moment of Resurrection. What follows, emerges out of this eschatological context. Overcome by the full force of empathy for the pile of rotting bodies and lives, Aġmad Āqā experiences an epiphany which was of a world whose unfolding would be other than the one transpiring in front of his eyes. There he beholds the possibility of another world founded on the liberating murder of the God who is responsible for the inescapable misery that engulfs His world. Here the reader is drawn into the core of the *Patient Stone*, where the text, the author, and the patient stone merge into what must be regarded as Chubak's existential view of literature; to create another world.

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