

Determining the Approximate Location of the Narrator in the Blind Owl in the Southeastern Neighborhoods of "Safavid-Qajar Tehran"

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Sadeq Hedayat's "The Blind Owl" is a complicated novel shrouded in obscurity and ambiguity due to the recounting of some mental memories by a disturbed narrator. Therefore, unpacking the various elements of this novel requires meticulous attention to the details in the narrative. Location is one of the most important elements of fiction. In this article, an attempt is made to determine the possible location of the narrator by examining some spatial features in "The Blind Owl" and match them to some areas in Rey and old Tehran. "The Blind Owl" is a literary text and should not be reduced to a realistic narrative. Bearing this in mind, this article aimed to identify some textual clues in the novel and correspond them with some contextual, including spatial and temporal, elements outside the novel to show that Hedayat was not inattentive to the geographical location and setting where the novel takes place.

2. Method

This study adopted a descriptive design incorporating content analysis. An attempt was made to determine the approximate location of the narrator by examining spatial features in the novel and identifying spatial elements at the time of the events. By describing the southeastern neighborhoods of Tehran,

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located in the northwestern part of Ray (known as ancient Rey), the approximate location of the narrator is identified and represented.

3. Results and Discussion

The approximate location of the house from which the narrator describes the scenes using special narrative techniques can be determined by identifying and unveiling some textual clues in the novel and matching them to some spatial and temporal elements outside the novel. For instance, in the novel, while describing his house, the narrator says that his house is located outside the city and on the other side of the ditch and that he can easily feel the rabble and the crowd from the window of his room. Also, in this novel, the “Sar-e-Qabre Aqa Square”, which is actually the “Amin al-Sultan Square”, is referred to. In describing his room, the narrator in “The Blind Owl” refers to some features that implicitly remind us of the “Sar-e-Qabre Aqa Mausoleum”. The morgue of the “Chahardah Masum Cemetery”, which the dead were kept, was near the “Sar-e-Qabre Aqa Mausoleum”. The presence of the old coachman near the narrator’s place of residence further supports the identification of the above locations and places. Furthermore, the narrator refers to the ruins surrounding his house, the narrow and crooked alleys, the garbage dump by the ditch, the unscrupulous and rabble-like merchants, and, most importantly, “a quiet and restful spot, away from the hustle and bustle of people’s lives” that was thronged with people from the thirteenth day of Nowruz (Sizdah-Bedar) onward.

In one part of the story, the owner of the ‘hearse carriage’, who is a coffin maker, gravedigger, and Qur’an reciter, says, “I know where you live ... It’s only a few steps ...” away from the cemetery. The coachman’s referring to the cemetery and emphasizing its proximity to where the narrator lives are reminiscent of a group of cemeteries situated in the southeast of Qajar Tehran and northwest of ancient Ray, where the public cemeteries of Tehran were located there before 1925-1926. This cemetery referred to by the old coachman in the novel must be the famous “Chahardah Masum” or “Shah Abdol-Azim Cemetery”, which is located along with the “Sar-e-Qabre Aqa” neighborhood and “Shah Abdol-Azim Gate”.

The buildings adjacent to the Chahardah Masum Cemetery, including the brick kilns with conical structures arranged in a row at regular intervals from each other, are redolent of the strange structures and places that are referred

to in "The Blind Owl". It is reasonably likely that the same brick kilns with their thick black smoke could have captured the mind of the narrator in *The Blind Owl*. Also, in the novel, there are some references to pottery that are consistent with the characteristics of the above-mentioned neighborhoods.

The lands in Tehran, both in the east and the west, are rocky and barren; the only area suitable for pottery is located in the southeastern part of Tehran, an area which is extended from "Tupkhaneh Square" to the south, is rich in high-quality clay, and has been home to the brick and pottery kilns since a long time ago. In addition to the cemetery, a bazaar is located in the vicinity of the same neighborhood through which the narrator passes before leaving the gate leading to the ancient site. If this gate is the same as the "Doolab", or "Shah Abdol-Azim", gate and this cemetery are the same as the "Chahardah Masum", or "Shah Abdol-Azim", cemetery, the bazaar referred to in the novel must be the "Gate Bazaar", which at times was called "Hazrati Bazaar" or "Shah Abdol-Azim Bazaar". There used to be two charsu (crossroads) near this bazaar that housed the office of the city Darughachi. Maybe, that is why the narrator, both in his reveries and nightmares, imagines the city Darughachi and watchmen roaming around his house.

Based on the identified spatial clues mentioned above and other spatial and temporal clues discussed in this article, it can be said that the narrator's house is surrounded by the tradespeople, passersby, the butcher, the rag-and-bone dealer, the Qur'an reciter, and the coachman and is located opposite the bazaar, the cemetery, the ditch, and the gate. The spatial features of the narrator's house correspond with those of the southeastern of Tehran during the Safavid to Qajar periods. Therefore, it can be assumed that the narrator's house must have been near one of the gates adjoining the areas situated in the southeastern of Safavid or Qajar Tehran. The Turkmen neighborhood, "Mohammadiyah Square", and "Shah Abdol-Azim" bazaar and cemetery are near the same area identified above. These geographical features of the narrator's room, which resembles a family grave, match those of the "Sar-e-Qabre Aqa" neighborhood, where Sadeq Hedayat's grandmother is buried.

4. Conclusions

Hedayat, whose works bear witness to his ability as a creative and imaginative writer, could not have been ignorant of the significance of the element of setting and place in his most acclaimed work, *The Blind Owl*. Hedayat,

however, obviously did not intend to give a factual account of the historical geography of a region; rather, he aimed to create a structured, readable, and lasting novel, and, to this end, all the elements of the story had to be at the service of the narrative. Narrative ambiguity, as manifested in time and place and reinforced by the time shifts in the narrator's recounting of his memories, is one of the key features of *The Blind Owl*. Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, the approximate location of the narrator in *The Blind Owl* can be identified by carefully examining the textual clues in the novel and the historical geography of an area in old Tehran.

It is as if the narrator had positioned a camera in his room and rotated it during the course of the novel to capture the surrounding area. In fact, the spatial features of the narrator's house, which is surrounded by tradespeople, the rag-and-bone dealer ("Seyed Esmā'il Bazaar"), the butcher (the southern gate of the city leading to Nazi-Abad), the bazaar ("Shah Abdol-Azim Bazaar"), the gate and the ditch (the "Doolab" or "Shah Abdol-Azim" gate), and the cemeteries ("Sar-e-Qabre Aqa Mausoleum" and "Chahardah Masum Cemetery"), could only be matched with those of neighborhoods located in the southeast of Tehran, i.e. the areas within the vicinity of "Chale Meydan", Ray, "Shah Abdol-Azim", and the bazaar, areas which have witnessed different historical periods.

Keywords: Modern fiction, Sadeq Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, setting, time and place, narrator's location.

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