

## Exposing the Hidden

### A Study of Sohrab Sepehri's Seday-e Pay-e Ab as an attempt in Concreting the Abstract

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**Abstract:** Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980) is considered as one of the most influential contemporary poets and painters of Iran. He first started writing poetry by imitating the trend of free verse poetry known as "Nimaei", however, he very soon found his own unique style and continued on in that trend. His works have been translated into Italian, Spanish, English and French. He is known to have been very well educated in not only Islamic Mysticism, but also in Western philosophy and Far East religions like Buddhism due to his many trips abroad. Despite the fact that his poetry is known to be very simple in wording and rather close to colloquial language, however he still manages to convey deep life ponderings and philosophies. One of the most famous poems he is widely known for is Seday- Pay-e Ab, literary translated to English as "The Sound of Water's Footsteps", written in 1965. In this lengthy poem Sepehri not only tries to introduce himself, but also his ways of thoughts and beliefs. He uses very concrete metaphors and similes in the lines that depict his belief in God. In this paper, through presenting in brief the ideologies of classical mystical poetry and Derrida's deconstruction of the logocentric binaries; namely that of absence and presence, the author attempts to discuss the reasons behind the success of this poem in making abstract ideas concrete and how despite seeming novel and different in expressing Islamic mysticism he is still very much following other canon figures' steps. The author argues that language as a social construct and literature as a product of this is in fact the reason behind his simultaneous difference and similarity from the classics.

**Keywords:** Difference, Derrida, Logocentric, Sepehri, Deconstruction.

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## **Introduction:**

According to Social Construction, as understood from the definition provided in the *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, in each society there is a set of constructed understandings regarding the world and how it works, which is created by its members and preserved within themselves through their interactions with the outside world as well as with each other as a society, as a result, creating a shared assumption about the many “realities” mainly through the use of language (Leeds-Hurwitz 892-894).

Most followers of Abrahamic religions, namely Islam, agree on the fact that God exists despite the fact that He cannot be perceived with the eyes. This results in each person’s idea, understanding or mental lexicon image of this entity to be varied and different from what is understood by other individuals, but not too different from the other members within their shared society. In the Islamic tradition, Arefs and Sufis (mystics) have for centuries tried to make this divine entity more tangible through their poetry. Poetry that seems like “earthly” love poems one would write and present to a beloved on the surface, yet, bear deeper mystical traditions of the paths that transcend to The One leading to unity; which is known as “Tohid” in Islamic terminology.

In classical mystical poetry, among Persian speaking poets, the stages of reaching God (the ultimate truth) would be presented through “earthly” love in terms of a word by word translation which could be regarded like Romantic love poetry in the Western tradition. This tradition of mysticism has its own special schemas which prime through defined terminology, terminology that would obviously have primed a mystical meaning to the mind of people who followed these mystics such as Rumi at that time due to them sharing the same common social constructs. However, for modern readers glossaries would be a necessity in order to understand the connotations which seem very much absent for modern readers.

These meanings are not totally absent, in the sense that if we are to consider this in the logocentric absent/present binary mentioned by Derrida, they indeed, still very much bear these mystical connotations within them, as nothing is truly totally absent or present. There will always still be traces of a presence in any absence of meaning, or vice versa, being a product of a society with set social constructs at a certain time in history since language is pretty much alive and goes through the same changes as the society which uses it go through. This does not mean that their poetry is out of date at all and in itself is reason as to why their poetry has passed the test of time.

However, considering this and the fact that language is the essential tool in creating literature, through looking at the following excerpt from the explanation of literature as defined by the Routledge Dictionary for Literary Terms literature too, indeed is thought of as a product of society which helps preserve these created schemas to prime based on encounters of cultural values:

*... We may seek the characteristics of literature from many points of view, some intrinsic and some extrinsic. Extrinsicly, we will certainly want to regard it as a definite cultural institution, [with] an interrelated set of SEMIOTIC systems we can note the values a society assigns to its literature; these vary from society to society and from age to age ... Literature has commonly been distinguished from linguistic ephemera, effort being expanded to preserve it in script or oral tradition: it has been regarded as a potent tool in the transmission and preservation of cultural values.*

When literature is mentioned as a “cultural institution”, if the afore-mentioned definition of Social Construction is inserted, one is able to conclude that literature is indeed a form of Social Construct therefore, When language changes, so does the literature and the perception of literature as a product of society and its presentation.

Therefore, whilst studying a text by Saadi or Hafiz, one cannot rely on the meanings that the same words bear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if one is to fully understand all hidden connotations, but one would necessarily have to study that text bearing in mind that words, using Derrida’s terminology, signify a signified that may not be the same signified thing in the mind of a mystic poet from back in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century which would prime certain meanings in the mind of their audience. In glossaries such as *The Dictionary of Mystical Terms* known as “Kashfolmahjub” or *Rasa’el al-mansur* by Shah Nematollah Vali such terminology and their mystical meanings have been explained for readers who are new to these concepts, due to either belonging to a different cultural background or different eras, to be able to perceive what is meant by the descriptions. This tradition is thought to have been first initiated by Roudaki and continued on by other poets such as Sanaie, Hafiz, Rumi, Babatahir and etc.

After the rise of Modernism in Iran, which is pretty much in sync with the rest of the world despite not facing the evil’s that the Western world did after World War II, bearing impacts on the created literature and the ideologies behind theories of criticism of the age in the Western world (Habib 557). Iran’s Modernism started around the time of the Constitutional Revolution in 1906 and the social and cultural liberations and unrests that followed through the following years after this period. Of course, even though Iran is rather distant from the West,

however, it has not been a society closeted behind closed doors and thus, has not been immune against all that was happening outside of it, therefore, taking influence of global issues, however, maybe at a slightly slower rate (Mirabedini 10-14). This globalization of the era may be what can allow us to read a modern Iranian poem using Western theories of literary criticism.

Mystical poetry was thought to have lost its credibility in the modern times and were merely read and interpreted as simple love poetry. This could be due to a variety of reasons, one being that in contemporary times a sudden interest in free verse poetry took place; or maybe due to the fact that modernization entailed many unrests which sparked an interest in both the production and demand for “resistance” poetry among poets; or the matter of globalization where poets in Iran were introduced to philosophies of both the West and Far East through travelling abroad for studies and the translation of various texts and felt the need to incorporate their newly gained world knowledge within their art to help elevate and assist the understandings of their readers regarding the world.

### **Discussion:**

Sohrab Sepehri has plenty of poetry which has been well received over the years, however, Seday-e Pay-e Ab is the one that remains his signature work among Iranians. The poem starts with four simple lines that in all modesty introduce the present content state of the poet, creating the whole mood and setting of the poem. The rest of the poem is an attempt to show how he has reached this state of contentment and what his ideologies and beliefs are through the extended metaphor of listening to the sound of the footsteps of the flowing river of life. Despite the fact that these first four lines are directly about the poet, the following lines effortlessly connect with the reader and seem to be describing the inner feelings of whole generations which are a product of modernity and modernism. Selections of various parts of this lengthy poem have been extracted, anthologized and treated as individual poems as they stand clear and complete on their own. For the sake of brevity lines of his poem which are more related to the theme of this conference have been selected and will be discussed and compared with two examples of older classical poems.

The first binary he uses is in the line “ruzegaram bad nist” translated to “my days aren’t bad”. The bad/good binary here clearly shows the matter of absence/presence mentioned by Derrida. If something is not bad, it is not completely good. One is neither the result of the total

absence nor presence of the other. In one specific line of the poem he mentions “posht-e sar khastegi-ye tarikh ast”, behind us is stands the tired worn down history, which shows that he is well aware of the social constructs that he and his poetry are a product of. This history is what defines the good and the bad. Another binary he questions is that of the beauty/ugly binary. He questions why a tulip is considered more beautiful than a clover or that why people keep certain birds caged due to their “beauty”, but never keep birds like the vulture in cages and if that is because of fixed, formed perceptions of schemas as social constructs. Maybe he has been under the influence of Kant’s ideas of judgment of taste and aesthetics having studied art abroad. He later invites everyone to wash their eyes and to see differently, this difference of seeing is evidently played with in small deconstructions of binaries in terms of Derrida’s ideas in his own poem and his attempts of defamiliarization.

He speaks of a God he believes in which is close by, under the sweet smelling flowers of his garden by the pine tree, he says “man mosalmanam/ qheble-am yek gol-e sorkh”, meaning that I am a Muslim; I pray facing the red rose. Muslims are known to pray whilst standing in the direction heading towards the qibla, God’s house or in Islamic terminology, baytollah. He uses the term qibla which brings to mind God, which is not perceived by the eye and is hidden and follows it up quickly by the concrete image of the red rose giving it an embodiment. Later on in the poem this image makes a comeback when he says “kar-e ma nist shenasaei-ye raz-e gol-e sorkh/ kar-e ma shayad in bashad/ ke dar afsun-e gol-e sorkh shenavar bashim”, here he says that it isn’t our job to understand the secrets of the red rose, maybe our job is to be only charmed by the red rose. This is the same idea presented in other mystic poetry, where mystics admit there is no way to fully understand the wholeness of the ultimate Truth and that one may be stupefied and only realize that the more one understands the more he realizes how little one knows. Therefore the image of the red rose is a metaphor for God as the ultimate truth, and the magic of it would be in the mysteries it bears; mysteries that have tried to enter the body of literature in an attempt to be more concretely felt through poetic revelations.

The following lines of the poem try to ultimately coordinate other aspects of the Islamic ritual of prayer with more nature related images; his prayer mattress being a spring, his prayer stone, light, and so on. All these tangible, concrete images he uses gives the reader the idea that saying a prayer, is not that much different than understanding and perceiving nature and feeling the hidden presence of a God that has been considered absent or silent while evil happened and

this is what differentiates Sepehri from older classics despite the similarity of using nature; he does not use words or images that bring to mind grandeur. He speaks of God just as he does of his mother in the fifth line of the poem when he says, “I have a mother much better than the leaves of the trees” followed by the line ‘I have friends that are better than flowing streams” moving on to saying that he has a God that is nearby. Zarinkub, in the third volume of his *Historical Analysis of Free Verse Poetry* names Sepehri’s poem “as the only example of earthly Mysticism in the contemporary era which is aligned with some of the very best examples of mystic poetry in all the history of Persian literature” (196). Sepehri sees God in simplicity and familiarity, whereas the classical poets tried to present Him in terms of ultimate beauty, love and grandeur even when using nature as a form of making Him more tangible. In a Dobeiti by Babataher we read:

*Be sahra bengarom, sahra to vinom*  
*Be darya bengarom darya to vinom*  
*Be har ja bengarom kuh o dar o dasht*  
*Neshan-e rouye zibay-e to vinom*

Meaning that I look towards the fields, I see you/ I look towards the sea, I see you/ wherever I look be it fields, mountains or meadows/ I see the presence of your beautiful face. Despite the fact that Babataher uses nature related imagery, note the difference between the images; fields, meadows, seas and mountains, all being vast great and big, whereas Sepehri uses the natural setting in his own house garden; a pine tree and sweet scented flowers, this makes the entity which is trying to be presented in concrete terms feel more closer and more relatable to the reader despite the defamiliarizations incorporated. Also, Babataher sticks to the common trend in the long held mystical tradition of love poetry, trying to tell the absent beloved that the poet is loyal and does not realize the beloved’s absence and has only eyes for his Ultimate One true love. Sepehri on the other hand tries to present his perception of God as a result of his new way of looking at life or in his own terms, “washing his eyes to see from new perspectives” in an attempt to free himself from binaries and boundaries which would be realized through using Derridan deconstruction and Schklovsky’s defamiliarization.

Also in Rumi’s ghazal Number 648 which starts off by the lines: ey ghom-e be haj rafte kojaeid/ Kojaeid? Mashugh hamin jast beyaeid, beyaeid. Meaning that oh you people who go on pilgrims to Mecca, where are you? Where are you? Our beloved is right here, come back, come back. Considering the beloved as God and people going on pilgrim to see the concrete baytollah

to get a better feel of this intangible entity, Mowlana has reached a state that he understands the presence of God in all that surrounds him and this is what he attempts to convey to others through his poetry.

### **Conclusion:**

For many years, Mystical poets have been following certain trends of presenting abstract ideas in concrete forms namely through what is known as earthly love imagery and embodying God and presenting Him as a beloved and the Mystic as a lover which would be tangible to people who shared this knowledge of schemas as part of the social construct they lived in. In the twentieth century, the social constructs changed and with it the form of presentation of abstract ideas as well as the physical forms of the presentation of poetry changed and a preference for free verse Nimaei poetry over the classical forms such as the Ghazal was seen.

Sohrab Sepehri's poem, Seday-e Pay-e Ab is the only known poem in the Modern age to have attempted to portray Earthly Mysticism and has enjoyed much success becoming one of the cannon poems of this era. Sepehri, in his lengthy free verse poem, presents his ideologies and beliefs through questioning logocentric binaries in Derrida's words and using defamiliarisation in Schklovsky's terms of familiar nature to portray inner hidden themes of life, belief and philosophy. The simplicity of his words grasp the attention of the reader yet with this unfamiliar familiarity of the abstract he leaves a lasting tangibly concrete impact.

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