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**"We neither are of the past nor of the future"¹:
Analyzing the Two Opposing Aspects of a Female Character Through Four Modern Works
of Persian Fiction**

By Ronak Karami²

Abstract

Under Iran's growing contact with the West from 1925 until 1979, which caused cultural changes, modern writers were stuck between two realities: the vanishing culture of the past with its unified view of women and the modern Western-oriented culture of the present with its doubting, ironic, and fast-changing view of women. Both labels, the 'ethereal' (or inaccessible paragon) and the 'whore' (or accessible temptress) for female characters emerged in a major literary work of the 20th century in Iran, *The Blind Owl* (1937), by Hedayat due to these cultural changes. Furthermore, the labels appeared within some later modern Persian fictional works such as *Prince Ehtejab* (1969) by Golshiri, *The Night of Terror* (1978) by Shahdadi, and *Her Eyes* (1952) by Alavi. This essay aims to discuss why and how the two aspects of the ethereal and the whore appear in these four, modern works of Persian fiction. To do so, the paper displays the similarities that these female characters share with one another, the way they appear to share similarities with the male narrator's mother, and their relevance both to fine arts and with nature. Analyzing these four modern Persian fictional works in this essay is something more than just an effort to show how women were underestimated in literature even after Iran's modernization, but also to offer insights into persistent cultural assumptions, including relationships between women and men.

Keywords: Persian Fiction, The whore, The ethereal, Female characters, Feminism, Patriarchy, Iran

Introduction

When it comes to the representing women in literature, modern Iranian writers seek to involve women more than in classical texts. However, classical and modern Persian literature still share some important similarities. Iranian national identity, representing the desires and experiences of past generations, are each shaped by Persian folklore (Etehadieh, 2012, 151-153). The identity of an individual Iranian woman depends on these folktales as well, in the sense that she is evaluated through the lens of her country's cultural-historical background which has been mirrored in literature (Etehadieh, 2012, 152-153). The basic theme of Persian folklore is mostly romantic love, which focuses on the superficial external (mostly facial) beauty of a woman (Etehadieh, 2012, 154-155). These women are described under the shadow of a man (brother, father or husband) and, by comparison with men, are identified as passive, acquiescent, timid,

¹ A quotation from *The Night of Terror*'s narrator on page 25.

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emotional and conventional. Thus, the picture of women in classical Persian literature is not only a shadow in absolute darkness but a projection that originates in a male imagination (Etehadieh, 2012, 156-157). On the other hand, the picture of women is modified in modern Persian literature: with Iranian social and cultural changes, women's identity becomes one of the most controversial concerns for male writers (Etehadieh, 2012, 157-161). Even within some modern Persian works of fiction, women become the narrator to explore their own torments, as in *Her Eyes* (1952) by Bozorg Alavi. Yet the representation of these female characters' struggles is still depicted through a male gaze.³

Both labels, the 'ethereal' (or inaccessible paragon) and the 'whore' (or accessible temptress) for female characters, first appeared in a major literary work of 20th century in Iran, *The Blind Owl* (1937) by Sadegh Hedayat. However, it is not the only modern Persian work of fiction that identifies women with these characterizations. During the Pahlavi⁴ era (from 1925 until 1979), Iran's growing contact with the West aroused many contradictions, inner conflicts, and extravagancies (Kar, 1992, 17). By this time, "the novel became the best way to indicate individual's inner tension in the shape of a woman." (Nafisi, 2003, 987). These fiction writers were stuck between two realities, "one, the vanishing culture of the past with its unified and hierarchical view of women; the other, the modern Western-oriented culture of the present with its doubting, ironic view of the world and its fast-changing view of women." (Nafisi, 2003, 991). Linking the image of culture and woman to the regime's satanic power, which forced Iranians to change, Persian fiction writers altered the image of the unreal and idealized woman in classical Persian literature to a concrete and earthly one. However, these female characters do not seem complete since they have been transferred to modern fiction "without gaining [the] individuality...or some 'interiority'." (Nafisi, 2003, 988). Within these works of fiction, the reader confronts three different archetypal images of woman: the mother, the beloved or the ethereal woman, and the whore, all of whom—despite the fact that they carry seeds of destruction—are madly desired (Nafisi, 2003, 989). The women ruling with wit and majesty over the fertile land of classical literature are stripped and divided in later novels and mutilated or murdered as in *The Blind Owl*, *Prince Ehtejab* (1969) by Golshiri and *The Night of Terror* (1978) by Shahdadi (Nafisi, 2003, 988).

Together with Sadegh Hedayat, Hormoz Shahdadi, and Bozorg Alavi, Houshang Golshiri was one of the most influential modern Iranian fiction writers who affected Persian prose quite considerably during the 20th century (Taheri, 2004, 96). He came from a large family in Isfahan where he completed a bachelor's degree in Persian literature and started to teach elementary and high school. Golshiri became famous for his novella *Shazdeh Ehtejab (Prince Ehtejab)*, "which is a tortured journey of self-realization through the remembrance of things past." (Yavari, 2002, 6). If one intends to name the top five modern Iranian novels, *Prince Ehtejab* would be one of them, granted both for structure and for content (Taheri, 2004, 97). This work of fiction was first published in 1969, adapted into a screenplay in 1974 and translated into English and French. "Golshiri's skillful exploitation of stream of consciousness narration converts this story of outer actions into a drama of the life of the mind." (Yavari, 2002, 6). He shows how a writer can take modern Western forms and blend them with the Persian culture (Taheri, 2004, 92). "His writings are distinguished by their complex structure, vivid language, and subtle manipulations of narrative time" (Yavari, 2002, 8). Dealing with a long illness, Houshang Golshiri died in Tehran at the age of sixty-three.

³ The act of depicting women in literature from a masculine point of view

⁴ The ruling house of the imperial state of Iran from 1925 until 1979

The modern Persian narrative has long been associated with the name of Sadegh Hedayat (Sarshar, 2008, 9). He was born in an aristocratic family, graduated from French Catholic school, and tried his hand in many other fields in Europe such as engineering, architecture and dentistry, all of which he abandoned after a short period (Sarshar, 2008, 15-25). As a youngster, he attempted to drown himself in a river but was rescued by a fishing boat. In 1937, Hedayat traveled to India and there he released fifty hand-written copies of his masterpiece *Buf-e-Kur (The Blind Owl)*, which was translated into many different languages including French and English after his death. The novella is prose which requires deep understanding since its language turns to a coded one (Ghotbi, 1971, 5). Similar to *Prince Ehtejab*, this work of fiction is a journey of self-realization and contains two stories that the narrator describes (Ghotbi, 1971, 33). “Of the novels that become heretical and dangerous, the most controversial and enigmatic to this date is *The Blind Owl*.” (Nafisi, 2003, 988). Although the fiction is modern “with its timeless, placeless setting, its abstract and closed atmosphere, its circular plotless story and its use of symbolism”, it is modeled on the classical structure of Persian literature (Nafisi, 2003, 988). Becoming disappointed in his country’s socio-political situation, Hedayat left Iran for Paris again and committed suicide at the age of forty-eight.

Another important Iranian writer from the 1930s until 1950s was Bozorg Alavi, whose acclaimed novel *Chashmhayash (Her Eyes)* “caused a considerable stir and enjoyed a wide readership.” (Yavari, 2002, 5). Alavi was from a liberal and constitutionalist family, and he immigrated to Germany as a youngster in order to continue his education (Akbari Shalchi, 2007, 13-34). “Bozorg Alavi's strong sense of mission to enlighten the Iranian people helped him continue writing in spite of censorship” (Sandler, 1986, 249). He spent twenty-five years in exile teaching at Humboldt University since his writings implicated political issues in Iran (Akbari Shalchi, 2007, 13-34). Similar to Houshang Golshiri and most of his contemporaries, Alavi’s writings were affected by modern psychological theories (Yavari, 2002, 5). *Her Eyes*, “in which ideology, psychoanalysis, and romanticism smoothly blend into a poetical language, is a coherently depicted love story of a male artist...and an educated girl of aristocratic background.” (Yavari, 2002, 5). What makes Alavi distinctive is that he makes the female character’s voice heard in *Her Eyes*. He attempts to show the ‘sordid world’ of *The Blind Owl*, which resulted in the artist’s alienation (Dastgheyb, 1979, 128). After all his failed political efforts, Alavi returned to Berlin and died at the age of ninety-three.

“Hormoz Shahdadi is yet another writer who evokes the life of his times through the eyes of an intellectual, alienated from himself and filled with anxiety in his novel, *Shab-e Howl (The Night of Terror)*. The narrative, characterized by its multi-layered structure, benefits from Shahdadi’s skillful use of extended interior monologues” (Yavari, 2002, 9). *The Night of Terror* includes structural innovations, which make the narrative difficult to comprehend. Consequently, there are many contradictions in few critical essays that have discussed this work of fiction (Bayat & Hasanaklu, 2014, 1). Similar to *Prince Ehtejab*, the fiction narrates different stories through history, and its structure appears to be of a thousand fragmentary pieces (Madomeh). Today, Shahdadi is an adjunct faculty member teaching in the Department of political science at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. He owes his reputation to *The Night of Terror*, which has been ignored because it was published during the year that the Islamic revolution occurred in Iran.

Feminism and the Struggle for Women's Rights in Iran

Feminism has a background of two centuries of struggle for the recognition of women's cultural, social and political roles and rights in the West. Considering different points of view, the movement has become a regular part of Western cultural discourse, interrelated with the politics of social, legal, cultural freedom and equality, and it contains a variety of subcategories and borders (Beasley, 2006, 12). During the 1960s and early 1970s, "the subject of feminism was women's experience under patriarchy, the long tradition of male rule in society which silenced women's voices, distorted their lives, and treated their concerns as peripheral." (Rivkin, 2017, 527). However, from the 1980s, women's experience under patriarchy was not the matter of concern anymore. "The mid-1980s are in retrospect a moment of great change in feminist criticism" (Rivkin, 2017, 528). Critics started to question the nature of gender, and gender studies appeared as a separate university branch (Korsmeyer, 2004). However, the struggle for women's rights is therefore different from the progress achieved in the West.

It would not be possible to observe the history of women's situation in Iran without 'patriarchy', and the emergence of few specific circumstances is not a reason to deny Iranian male-centered society (Etehadieh, 2012, 39). According to manuscripts, women were identified as imperfect, emotional, weak, passive and slothful during the Qajar era⁵, people who must serve their father or husband in a family organization (Etehadieh, 2012, 53). They neither had the opportunity to become educated nor to choose their husbands; in fact, women were handed off from one man (their father) to the other (their husband) as an object (Etehadieh, 2012, 54-55). "As Iran began to have increasing contact with the West, many sectors of the population—especially intellectuals, minorities, clerics, and women—became increasingly aware of their nation's problems" (Nafisi, 2003, 983). The Persian constitutional revolution and the establishment of the parliament took place between the years 1905 and 1911 and caused deep changes in Iranian society and an actual distance from the past as well (Etehadieh, 2012, 42). During these years, women found their voice and got the courage to question men's dominance (Etehadieh, 2012, 58-59). The movement was a sub-movement and a part of the great national movement in Iran with the aim of independence for the country; therefore, a small number of the constitutionalists were supportive of the rights of women. Although constitutionalism concluded women's social presence, it did not bring a remarkable modification for their situation and the court did not confer any rights on women (Etehadieh, 2012, 42).

The decade of 1960-1970 was one of the most controversial periods for Iranian women (Kar, 1992, 17) when the Pahlavi dynasty⁶ reconsidered women's situation in society (Etehadieh, 2012, 43). However, some remaining traditions caused a retrogressive situation in the country and women's condition did not improve in family organizations (Etehadieh, 2012, 40). Not only did the Persian constitutional revolution and Pahlavi regime's reforms not meliorate women's status, but they also made women feel that they had been left behind (Etehadieh, 2012, 49). The dissatisfaction drove women to participate in the Islamic revolution⁷ and soon after in the Iran-Iraq war so that they might gain a qualified position equal to men in the society (Kar, 1992, 18-21). Although the late struggles turned out to be a failure as well (since the Islamic Republic of Iran does not treat women and men with equality), there are shreds of evidence that prove feministic views are developing among the young generation of Iranians nowadays despite the

⁵ An Iranian royal dynasty during 1785-1925

⁶ An Iranian royal dynasty after the fall of Qajar dynasty during 1925-1979

⁷ The events which involved the overthrow of Pahlavi dynasty in order to replace the Persian monarchy with an Islamic republic

government's limitations. According to Charles Kurzman, several speculations, such as revolutionary mobilization, generated a heightened sense of efficacy among women, and the policies of the Islamic Republic that generated backlash among women procreated gender-egalitarian values and pushed women into assuming greater responsibilities in spite of the patriarchal content of the instruction and economic difficulties (Kurzman, 2008, 320). Despite the fact that feministic views are not widespread among Iranians due to restrictions, women have been under many fluctuations in order to find a competent place equal to men and still are struggling to improve their conditions.

Breaking Down the Works of Fiction

Let us discuss the way Sadegh Hedayat delineates the story of the ethereal woman and the accessible temptress within two main parts (the first and the third part) of *The Blind Owl*. Each part is a central metaphor for the other (Nafisi, 2003, 988) and the second and fourth parts appear to be connectives. He begins with telling the story of how he had met the ethereal woman from an orifice on the wall. "On the spur of the moment, I saw a bent old man sitting at the foot of a cypress tree with a young girl—no, an angel from heaven—standing before him. She was leaning forward and with her right hand was offering him a blue flower of morning glory" (Hedayat, 1971, 12). She sounds perfectly enchanted with her wild, black eyes that make her look like a supernatural being who has nothing to do with the human world (Hedayat, 1971, 15-18). The ethereal woman does not have a name since the speaker "must not defile her name by contact with earthly things" (Hedayat, 1971, 10). It seems as if the narrator has known this woman for eternity and recollects his grievous past behind her eyes (Hedayat, 1971, 16-22). "I had been tortured by the mere memory of her eyes" (Hedayat, 1971, 21). In addition, the ethereal woman is completely silent and the sole speaker is the male narrator. In fact, both female characters (the ethereal and the whore) in the work of fiction are much more passive than the female characters in classical Iranian narratives (Nafisi, 2003, 990). One night when the protagonist arrives at home, he finds the ethereal woman near his house. She enters the house with him as if she knows the way and lies down in his bed without saying a word. "She seemed neither to be afraid nor to be inclined to resist" (Hedayat, 1971, 19). Yet, similar to the other three fiction narrators in this paper, the speaker does not let himself have sexual desires for the ethereal woman. "It was inevitable that I should be close to her in this life. At no time did I desire to touch her. The invisible rays which emanated from our bodies and mingled together were sufficient contact." (Hedayat, 1971, 14). Near the end of the first chapter, the narrator kills the ethereal woman by poisoning her with a venomous wine, then cuts her body into pieces, puts them inside a suitcase and buries her so that no one can see her ethereal beauty.

The accessible temptress woman in *The Blind Owl*, who is the narrator's wife and cousin at the same time, shares a similar appearance with the ethereal woman. "She was wearing a black dress of very fine, light material, apparently silk and he was biting the nail of one of the fingers of her left hand...I had the feeling that I had seen her before and knew who she was but could not be sure" (Hedayat, 1971, 61). Similar to the ethereal woman, she is mute and appears nameless since the speaker cannot find a more suitable name for her than 'the bitch'. "I call her 'the bitch' because no other name would suit her so well" (Hedayat, 1971, 58). The narrator was fed on his aunt's breastmilk as a newborn and consequently could not marry his cousin, the accessible temptress (or his aunt's daughter), since she is regarded as his foster-sister. However, by the night that the aunt dies, the accessible temptress comes to him and starts to kiss him until her father faces them. In

order to keep the family's reputation, the narrator reluctantly marries her, but she does not let him in her bed from the first night of their marriage. Hence, he suspects that his wife is having an affair with numerous lovers including the odds-and-ends old man (or the fearsome old man) who apparently has been the speaker himself throughout the narrative (Beard, 1990, 87). "The woman becomes the source of constant torture, a temptation that leads to guilt. The narrator cannot have an active and healthy relationship with either of these women" (Nafisi, 2003, 989). Hitting rock bottom, one night the speaker makes himself up the same as the fearsome old man who he assumes is his wife's permanent lover so that she might let him in her bed. While making love with her, he stabs her in the eyes and kills the woman. In fact, the speaker kills a woman or the two aspects of the same woman near the end of each part as if he mourns the breakdown of the idealized relationships between women and men in classical Persian fiction (Nafisi, 2003, 988).

Within the novella *Prince Ehtejab*, the prince's wife (the ethereal woman) always looks at him through her glasses and seemingly does not have the smallest affection toward anything but their forebear's diaries (Golshiri, 1978, 8-9). Fakhr-o-Nesa, a slim, pale, cold-hearted woman is Ehtejab's cousin and wife at the same time. Little by little, he describes Fakhr-o-Nesa's acts as though he is uncertain of her existence. "Wearing the same white dress which was waved by wrinkles down to her breasts, Fakhr-o-Nesa was standing beside the carriage, looking through her glasses, or not!"⁸ (Golshiri, 1978, 8). She covers her beautiful eyes with glasses as if there is a border between her and the prince. Additionally, she is being described as noble and delicate, covered with a lacy white dress (Golshiri, 1978, 7-8). The narrator describes Fakhr-o-Nesa as "a cold weighted object between the prince's hands" when she sarcastically tells him, "he is way back of their ancestors in pleasure seeking" (Golshiri, 1978, 12). Moreover, when Golshiri speaks of his own view toward Fakhr-o-Nesa, he points out that Prince Ehtejab is trying to know himself through this woman since she happens to have power over him (Taheri, 2004, 68). In addition, her name, which suggests glory and pride, has an aristocratic connotation. There is a sense of tension between the couple as if the prince does not let himself have sexual desires for her, and whenever they intend to make love it has to be in the darkness (Golshiri, 1978, 11-12). Her one single role in the prince's life is to wear makeup, have supper beside him and wait for him in her bed at night (Golshiri, 1978, 6).

Fakhri (the accessible temptress), is a fleshy, spirited young maidservant with wild black eyes in Prince Ehtejab's house, who looks at the prince from a mirror, and in comparison to Fakhr-o-Nesa has much more affection toward the prince (Golshiri, 1978, 48). Her name is an incomplete form of Fakhr-o-Nesa, which, to some degree, explicates the reason why Ehtejab imagines Fakhri as imperfect, and his concern is to simulate her with Fakhr-o-Nesa. He begins his sexual acts with Fakhri when he makes her laugh aloud so that Fakhr-o-Nesa's coughing sound smothers in her laughter (Golshiri, 1978, 61). In fact, he uses one woman to torture the other. After Fakhr-o-Nesa's death from tuberculosis that somehow results in Ehtejab's relief, he tears Fakhri's veil up, starts to make love with her next to the corpse and forces her to make herself up like Fakhr-o-Nesa from then on. "The prince moved his hand among Fakhri's hair and removed her tears, passing the cheek powder on her face, with his hand: these are Fakhri's occupations. You are the mistress of the house. Got it? She is the one who must wash the dishes and clean the rooms. Then laughs loud and hides in the kitchen as I tickle her" (Golshiri, 1978, 28). The prince then beats Fakhri when she does not obey in making herself up like Fakhr-o-Nesa. He finds peace and pleasure in putting his head between Fakhri's breasts and falls asleep in that position. In the first parts of the book, the narrator introduces Fakhri and Fakhr-o-Nesa as two separate characters. Further, these two women

⁸ The extracts from *Prince Ehtejab*, *The Night of Terror*, and *Her Eyes* have been translated by the author

are shown as one and the point of view shifts from line to line and character to character so that the addressee gets confused reading through the dialogues.

Through *The Night of Terror*, Azar, an old classmate of the speaker, owns the image of the ethereal woman. “There is a woman that arises from my dreams or something like that! Where do I remember this from?” (Shahdadi, 1979, 18), and Azar is one of those (Shahdadi, 1979, 166). Although the speaker keeps an intimate relationship with all his female classmates, he feels impotent in confronting Azar since she happens to be inaccessible and intangible; similar to Ehtejab and *The Blind Owl*’s speaker, he does not let himself have sexual desires for Azar. She always smiles and mesmerizes unlike the narrator’s wife, Iran, who “seemed earthly not smiling all the time” (Shahdadi, 1979, 168). “Azar was not into making conversations much, she could not be tamed ...unlike Iran who was into everything and tamed” (Shahdadi, 1979, 164). Azar owns a pair of wild black eyes (like that of Persian miniatures) and her name originates in the name of the goddess of fire in Persian mythology. Dissimilar to other narrators that have been observed in this paper, the speaker in *The Night of Terror* seems to have an awareness of his views toward Azar when he admits “sometimes the actual and the illusion are not recognizable...and one will see whatever s/he wants in a way s/he wants it to be” (Shahdadi, 1979, 10).

The female character who bears the image of the whore, Satan or accessible temptress in *The Night of Terror*, named Iran, who unlike the image of a Persian woman within classical fiction, has blond hair and a pair of small brown eyes. “At our first date, I told her that her name does not match with her blond hair. Blond Iran. The combination of blond hair and blue eyes is rare among Iranians. But her eyes are not blue. She has small brown eyes” (Shahdadi, 1979, 20). Her name resembles the name of the country in order to show the torments that the country and the image of women have been through, or similar to *The Blind Owl*, to depict the breakdown of the idealized relationships between women and men in classical Persian fiction (Nafisi, 2003, 988). Since she does not carry the miniature picture of a Persian woman, she appears as the ‘other’ or a stranger. By the time the speaker is recalling his memories, Iran has already gotten divorced from him and had an abortion. Same as the narrator of *The Blind Owl*, the speaker’s reason for marrying Iran is vague. Describing their married life, he objects to the way Iran tortures him for no reason. Yet, he starts to remember how much he appreciates her by the time they have gotten divorced. “After these five months, suddenly I missed her. I want to possess her” (Shahdadi, 1979, 21). “After living a long life with her, I finally recognized that I have never known her” (Shahdadi, 1979, 174). Unlike Fakhr-o-Nesa and the female character in *The Blind Owl*, who are almost mute, the point of view shifts to Iran within three pages in order to inform the reader about her inner feelings toward the narrator and their marriage life. “And if only my husband would have seen from the first time that I am not the perfect image in his mind but a normal human being, that I am alive and capable of understanding, a person who gets angry or upset and needs to be comforted...” (Shahdadi, 1979, 177).

The matter of these two aspects of women in modern Persian literature, the ethereal and the whore, appear differently in Bozorg Alavi’s novella *Her Eyes* than in the other three novels. The writer does not create two separate characters; rather, he depicts the two aspects through one single character from the beginning; in comparison to those other three works of fiction, *Her Eyes* is easier to comprehend. The female character, whose mysterious eyes have been portrayed in one of the most famous Iranian male artist’s paintings, describes her torments to the narrator who is a schoolmaster and holds an exhibition for the artist’s drawings every year. At first, the schoolmaster labels the woman as a ‘whore’ whom he wishes to possess for one night (Alavi, 2016, 61-65), but near the end of the story when he becomes aware of the woman’s torments, he seems to show

respect toward her (Alavi, 2016, 247). She would rather be called the 'unknown woman' since she is ashamed of her deeds in the past; instead, the narrator prefers to call her by a fake name, Farangis, which means a woman who has bushy hair. Farangis seems a perfect woman to the men's eyes because of her external ethereal beauty (like that of Persian miniatures) and her wealth; however, she falls in love with the intellectual artist that has put all his energy into overthrowing the current regime and does not show the smallest affection toward this woman's magical beauty. She puts herself into serious trouble in order to gain the artist's attention because she feels that her identity is dependent on him. "He could have made an angel out of me, but he made a devil instead" (Alavi, 2016, 125). The unknown woman suffers from her inconsistent personality and considers the two aspects of ethereal and the whore that has been imposed on her by the male-centered society, as the source of her misery. "I always had a dilemma. I always was on a slope with one foot and at a height with the other. Consequently, my existence was always suspended" (Alavi, 2016, 82). "I am the one people call the tyrant. Powerful to the weak and submissive to the powerful" (Dastgheyb, 1979, 137). Like the ethereal women within those other three works of fiction, the writer pictures the unknown woman with details in a way that the reader might think that s/he has known this character from eternity (Dastgheyb, 1979, 123). Although the narrator describes Farangis's eyes as perfectly beautiful blended with cruelty (similar to the way the artist has pictured them), she claims, "Your artist has not gotten to know me and has portrayed me with such eyes; these are not my eyes." (Alavi, 2016, 252).

In much of the modern Persian literature, such as *The Blind Owl* and *Prince Ehtejab*, the mother is one of the archetypal images that carry seeds of destruction and is madly desired (Nafisi, 2003, 989). In a sense, the ethereal and the whore appear to share similarities with the narrator's mother. These women have been built out of the projection of the mother in a male psyche. Within the story of *The Blind Owl*, the speaker's birth mother is "called Bugam Dasi, a dancer in a lingam temple...She was a hot-blooded, olive-skinned girl, with lemon-shaped breasts, great, slanting eyes and slender eyebrows which met in the middle" (Hedayat, 1971, 47). When the narrator meets the ethereal for the first time, he notices that "No one but a Hindu temple dancer could have possessed her harmonious grace of movement" (Hedayat, 1971, 13). He has never seen his birth mother and has been raised by his aunt. "Ever since I can remember I looked upon my aunt as a mother and loved her deeply. I loved her so deeply that later on, I married her daughter, my foster-sister, simply because she looked like her" (Hedayat, 1971, 50). Apparently, what the speaker craves is not a sexual satisfaction but a mother's caress. "When I awoke in the morning my nurse said to me, 'My daughter'— she meant the bitch, my wife—'came to your bedside and took your head in her lap and rocked you like a baby'" (Hedayat, 1971, 56). In other words, he is impotent to make love with both women (the ethereal and the whore) since they bare the image of the mother.

Throughout *Prince Ehtejab*, the reader finds out about Ehtejab's mother who seems passive with her diminutive existence in the prince's life. On the other hand, she shares some differences and similarities in appearance with Fakhr-o-Nesa. Ehtejab has no vivid memory of his mother and her role is not noteworthy in comparison to his father and grandfather during his childhood. He does not remember his mother much, except that she is crying most of the time, unlike Fakhr-o-Nesa who smiles elegantly very often (Golshiri, 1978, 32). Both women are delicate and slim with small white hands (Golshiri, 1978, 26-27). The mother wears a long black lace veil while the wife is always in a long white lace dress (Golshiri, 1978, 26-27). However, the first time that the prince runs across Fakhr-o-Nesa, he finds her in a long, black dress (Golshiri, 1978, 74). Therefore, it seems that the prince has created a woman in his unconscious based on resemblance and

dissimilarities of his mother to satisfy his injured feelings of mother's deficiency and absence. This is illustrated by how Fakhr-o-Nesa sarcastically addresses him when he meets her after the death of his mother. "Alright, now that your mother had passed away and you feel alone, you remembered to stop by and meet your fiancé..." (Golshiri, 1978, 34). The addressee only gets to recognize Fakhr-o-Nesa through Ehtejab's eye and he, too, describes this woman out of the projection of his mother's image.

Of the four works of fiction that have been considered in this paper, three carry the implication of 'Mother Nature' through the female characters. Mother Nature is a common personification of nature that focuses on the life-giving and nurturing aspects of nature in the form of a mother. Although his house is located in the middle of a desert, the speaker of *The Blind Owl* meets the ethereal woman for the first time while she is beside a river offering a flower to an old man who is sitting at the foot of a cypress tree. Then, when he is recalling his childhood memories with his wife, the whore, he notifies that they were playing somewhere similar to the place where he first saw the ethereal woman, a scene that later became the object of all his paintings (Hedayat, 1971, 61-62). The wild nature has turned to a desert the way the ethereal woman has turned to a whore in the same manner as the traditional Iranian culture (the old reality) shifted to the modern culture (the new reality). In the work of fiction, *The Night of Terror*, the narrator calls the country 'Mother Iran' who keeps both her Jew and Christian children together inside her house (Shahdadi, 1979, 8). Moreover, the accessible temptress or the narrator's wife, Iran, decides to revolt against her subordinate status while she notices the productive and indomitable features of nature (Shahdadi, 1979, 179). Within the story of *Prince Ehtejab*, there is a scene in which nature alters its condition with Fakhr-o-Nesa's inner feelings. While she puts her fragile legs down to the pool, the golden fish come around her feet as if they are kissing her toes, and seemingly the sky is clear, but by the time she pulls her legs out of the water, the sky is covered with clouds (Golshiri, 105-109). The way women communicate with nature in these works of fiction reflects how the male psyche's concern is the old and the new culture (or reality), while by systematic opposition to this trait, the ethereal and the accessible temptress are bound to nature.

The connection of the ethereal and the whore with 'fine arts' is another controversial issue in three of the novels that have been discussed in this essay. Feminist critics from 1980s start to question the grandeur of fine arts, which include painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and literature, for it carries a gender qualification. "The concept of art, considered in its aspect of 'fine art', is a gendered concept that selects as its paradigms mostly work that have been made by male creators" (Korsmeyer, 2004). For some unknown reasons, the speaker of *The Blind Owl* keeps drawing the picture "of a cypress tree at the foot of which was squatting a bent old man like an Indian fakir...Before him stood a girl in a long black dress, leaning towards him and offering him a flower of morning glory" (Hedayat, 1971, 11). Moreover, the narrator's mother was an Indian dancer, which has been known as the first art on earth (Wikipedia). Farangis's mysterious eyes become the subject of one of the portraits of the most famous Iranian male artists in the story of *Her Eyes*. Her constant attempt to become an illustrious artist appears to be a failure; therefore, she turns to the famous male artist who, she thinks, has the skill that she lacks. The story of *The Night of Terror* both starts and ends while a piece of music is being played through the mind of the central character, Ebrahim. "And the woman's voice has been lost in the ears of those who have been lost" (Shahdadi, 1979, 5). The concept of art, considered in its aspect of fine art, represents a partiality for objectivity over subjectivity and impersonal over personal; it is the vision of a single creator and is for contemplation rather than use (Korsmeyer, 2004). Hence, not only are these female characters shown under the shadow of a male presenter without having

individuality through the world of fiction, but they become the subject of an impersonal male-created art.

As was mentioned earlier, under the cultural changes and the advent of a new reality (new culture) in Iran, the ethereal picture of women in classical Persian literature has been transferred into the world of modern Persian fiction as an accessible temptress or a whore without an identity. Manifestly, the old reality is destroyed and the new is still unattainable for modern Iranian writers (Nafisi, 2003, 989). In addition, the impotent male psyche, which is unable to deal with the new reality, regulates itself around the shape of a woman (Nafisi, 2003, 988). Creating active female characters and a dialogue between them and the male characters seems to be a major obstacle to the development of the Iranian novel despite the writers' effort (Nafisi, 2003, 990-991). "Those writers who continued writing in the Iranian milieu of the 1960s and 1970s were imbued with a deep sense of their artistic mission" (Sandler, 1986, 249). In modern Persian fiction, "the male narrator becomes a victim of his own obsession while blaming it on a woman" (Nafisi, 2003, 990), and the woman appears as a manifestation of this new seductive, and at the same time frightening, reality (Nafisi, 2003, 989). Henceforth, analyzing the connections among the female characters within four separate modern Persian novels, in order to illustrate the way these women are depicted and labeled with two aspects under the cultural changes by male writers, offers many insights into the cultural assumptions including relationships between women and men.

Conclusion

In comparison to the inaccessible, ethereal image of women in classical Persian literature, modern Persian literature seems to present an earthly picture of women, suitable for the new culture and the new reality that mirrored Iran's increasing contact with the West mostly during the 1960s and 1970s. At this time, the old reality ("traditional" Iranian culture) was destroyed but the new reality (modern culture) still seems unattainable for Iranians. Accordingly, modern Persian fiction writers transformed the image of the unreal and idealized woman in classical Persian literature to a concrete and tangible one; yet, these women rarely count as complete characters since they have been transferred to modern fiction without gaining individuality or some interiority. The female characters, who rule with wit and majesty over the fertile land of classical literature, are divided in modern fiction without achieving identities. Apparently, modern Iranian writers are stuck between two realities, one that is the vanishing culture of the past with its unified and hierarchical view of women; the other that is the modern, Western-oriented culture of the present with its ironic view of the world and its fast-changing view of women. This essay has analyzed those female characters who are represented with the two aspects—the ethereal and the whore—within four modern Persian novels, *The Blind Owl*, *Prince Ehtejab*, *The Night of Terror* and *Her Eyes*, in order to offer a different understanding of the cultural assumptions.

The images of the ethereal and the whore share many similarities in the four modern Persian fictions. When it comes to the ethereal woman or the inaccessible paragon, the narrators claim that they have been known her for eternity. They do not let themselves have sexual desires for her since she sounds intangible. The speakers are trying to know themselves through the ethereal woman because she seems to have power over them. Regarding the ethereal woman's external beauty, she carries the image of all those classical Persian miniatures with long black hair and a pair of wild black eyes. In many of the modern Persian works of literature, both the ethereal and the accessible temptress women appear to share similarities with the narrator's mother, who is one of the archetypal images that carry seeds of destruction and is madly desired. In other words,

these women have been built out of the projection of the mother in a male psyche. Moreover, the two female characters (or one with two different aspects) are combined with fine arts including painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and literature. The concept of art, considered in its aspect of fine art, carries a gender qualification as it selects works that have been made by male creators. In fact, both female characters seem to be stuck in a male world and sometimes, are even more passive than the female characters in classical Iranian narratives. The whore or the accessible temptress, who appears to be the incomplete form of the ethereal woman, becomes the source of constant torture for the speaker, a temptation that leads to guilt in a way that he cannot have an active and healthy relationship with her. The fictions carry the implication of 'Mother Nature', a common personification of nature that focuses on the life-giving and nurturing aspects of nature in the form of the mother, through the female characters. Consequently, while the male psyche matters, in the old and the new culture (or reality), the ethereal and the accessible temptress are bound to nature by systematic opposition to this trait. The representation of the two aspects of women is not limited to these four works of fiction; that is, to some extent, many of the modern Persian works of fiction that involve women characters share similarities with the ethereal and the whore in *The Blind Owl* as a consequence of the cultural changes and the emergence of the new reality. Although the country was being modernized during the late 1920s until 1970s, women did not find equality with men in most cases. This essay aims at working with four modern Persian works of fiction in order to depict women's and men's conflicts within the literature of the time. To sum up, analyzing the two aspects of a woman, the ethereal and the accessible temptress, through four modern Persian works of fiction in this essay is something more than just an effort to impart a different perspective to readers and offers many insights into the cultural assumptions including relationships between women and men.

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