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**Sadeq Hedayat's *Three Drops of Blood* and *The Blind Owl*  
and Nikolai Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District***

**Jalil Nozari**

Independent Researcher

Bandar Mahshahr, Iran

jnozari@gmail.com

*Abstract*

After more than seven decades since its publication, Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* still remains a mystery to critical analysis. The appearance of Mustafa Farzaneh's *Rencontres avec Sadeq Hedayat* provides us with threads to finding answers to some of the ambiguities surrounding the Persian novella. According to Farzaneh, Hedayat advised him to read the story of *Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo Uezda* by the Russian writer Nicholas Leskov to find clues to the love aspects of *The Blind Owl*. This article is an attempt to determine the bearing Farzaneh's testimony may have on the study of Hedayat's novella and another shorter work of his entitled *Three Drops of Blood*. By referring to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that the Russian novel's title is an allusion to, the study reveals that there are a number of interesting relations, from imagery to the theme of existences as penal colony, a Schopenhauerian notion, shared by these texts.

*Keywords*

Sadeq Hedayat, Nikolai Leskov, Mostafa Farzaneh, Shakespeare, *The Blind Owl*, *Ledi Makbet*, authenticity, *Three Drops of Blood*, Modern Persian Literature

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**«Три капли крови» и «Слепая сова» Садека Хедаята  
и «Леди Макбет Мценского уезда» Николая Лескова**

**Джалил Нозари**

Независимый исследователь

Бандар Махшахр, Иран

jnozari@gmail.com

*Аннотация*

После более чем семидесяти лет, прошедших со времени публикации «Слепой совы» Садека Хедаята, это произведение остается загадочным для исследователей. Публика-

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ция «Rencontres avec Sadeqh Hedayat» («Встречи с Садеком Хедаятом») Мустафы Фарзанае дает нам некоторые подсказки для понимания персидской повести. Как сообщает Фарзанае, Хедаят советовал ему прочитать «Леди Макбет Мценского уезда» русского писателя Николая Лескова, чтобы найти там ключ к пониманию любовных аспектов «Слепой совы». В настоящей статье предпринята попытка оценить значение свидетельства Фарзанае для изучения как этой повести Хедаята, так и его рассказа «Три капли крови». Опосредованная Лесковым отсылка к «Макбету» Шекспира открывает целый ряд интересных взаимосвязей, вплоть до шопенгауэровского представления о существовании как исправительной колонии, которое подразумевается в этих текстах Хедаята.

*Ключевые слова*

Садек Хедаят, Николай Лесков, Мустафа Фарзанае, Шекспир, «Слепая сова», Леди Макбет, аутентичность, «Три капли крови», современная персидская литература

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Sadeq Hedayat (1903–1951) is a prominent Iranian literary figure. His masterpiece, *Buf-i Kur (The Blind Owl)*, Bombay, 1936), has remained an unsurpassed work in contemporary Iranian literature. The central scene of the novel depicts an old man offering a morning glory flower to an ethereal girl while a river separates them from each other. The story has not yet been systematically studied, and a number of ambiguities are awaiting explanation.

Mostafa Farzaneh (b. 1929) writer, film director and playwright residing in Paris was a friend of Hedayat in his early young years, meeting him frequently while the latter still lived in Iran and after his final departure to Paris before his death there. Publication of Farzaneh's *Ashnaye ba Sadeq Hedayat (Rencontres avec Sadeqh Hedayat)* in 1994 made it possible to try account for the love theme of the text [Farzaneh, 1372 (1994)].

Farzaneh quotes Hedayat who advised him to read a certain masterpiece to find some clues as to the love aspects of *The Blind Owl*. Hedayat, writes Farzaneh, wrote the name of the book neatly on a piece of paper and handed it to him. The note read: “*Lady Macbeth au Village, de Nicholas Leskov*” [Farzaneh, 1372 (1994), p. 208]. This article is an attempt to determine the bearing this claim may have on the study of Hedayat's novella and another shorter work of his entitled *Sih Qatrih Khun [Three Drops of Blood]*, 1932], and to see if there is any points of relation among them. A study of the relations between the two authors has not been conducted so far. It has, also, to be noted that this study is a part of a larger enterprise of re-reading Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* [Hedayat, 1978a].

Nikolai Leskov (1831–1895) has been described as the greatest Russian storywriter. His finest story, *Ledi Makbet Mtsenskogo Uezda*, published 1865, was translated into English by David Magarshack under the title *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and published in 1961 [Leskov, 1961]. In 1969, W. B. Edgerton translated into English, for the first time, thirteen of Leskov's stories. Clearly, Hedayat had not had the option to read the book in English, a point counting for the difference between the titles.

The title of the book written for Farzaneh by Hedayat belongs to the French translation of the Russian novel. A book bearing that title was published by P. Gallimard in 1939. By that year it had already been more than two years since *The Blind Owl* had

been published in Bombay. Moreover, it is not evident that Hedayat had had the chance to read the translated novel in its publication year. However, despite all my attempts, I have not been able to ascertain to what edition or reprint the above-mentioned title belonged to, or, if, that was the only or the first French translation.

Even if Hedayat had not had the chance to read the novel before the compilation of his novella and releasing it in 1936, still it is not pointless from research point of view to look for parallels relating the two texts together thematically. If Hedayat did not have a favourable attitude in him towards the other text, he would not have recommended its reading to his friend, and that with a clear hint to the love aspect.

The question is whether we can trace a thread from the Russian story finding its way into the textures of *The Three Drops of Blood* and *The Blind Owl* so that it has helped, in one way or the other, the colouring of the Persian texts, interweaving itself in their structure. With regard to more overt correspondences between Leskov's story and the Persian short story, in comparison with more covert thematic ones with *The Blind Owl*, it is relevant to start with the short story.

The motif of *The Three Drops of Blood* is authenticity, as is that of *The Blind Owl*. The problem for the narrator, to confront it squarely in the face, is who is the "I" in contrast to the other people? Who, or what, are they? Who am I and what relationship do I maintain with them? What is it which makes me, or, in other words, makes my individuality, distinguishing me from others? "For a whole year," he explains, "I've lived among these queer and strange people. We don't have anything in common; we are as different as night and day. But their moans, their silence, their cursing, their weeping, and their laughter will fill my sleep with nightmares forever" (60).

As in *The Blind Owl*, the short story is narrated with a sideward glance to a listener whom we do not know, possibly his double. The hint is given in only one place: "You yourself saw it; you yourself are my witness" (66). Like in *The Blind Owl*, many characters are reducible to one: the supervisor, Abbas, Siavash and Mirza Ahmad all are the different faces of the narrator himself, who is called "mad" (67). He creates doubles of himself to see them as others do him. To escape from the commonality of, "always, the same people, the same food, the same blue room" (61), he resorts to the tactic of creating his doubles to refresh and sharpen his sense of individuality and separate being: "the strangest of all is my friend and neighbour 'Abbas'" (62), while we know that Abbas is nobody but himself. "Our house was near the *ditch*" (63) writes he, an address taking us to the dwelling places of a couple of characters in Hedayat works. If he is not the very narrator of *The Blind Owl*, he is his neighbour! The words given here as "ditch" and in *The Blind Owl* as "gully" are both different translations for "khandaqh" in the two original texts.

Nazi, the female cat of the short story whose mewing disturbs the narrator's sleep, is given both the attributes of the old man and the ethereal girl of the novella. The cat is lost after her mate is killed, until later we, together with the narrator, hear only her mewing. As losing sight of the ethereal girl by the narrator of *The Blind Owl* after seeing her once through the ventilation hole (8), here in this short story, too, "the next day Nazi and her mate's corpse disappeared. Wherever I looked, whomever I questioned, it was all in vain. Had she stopped speaking to me? Was she dead? Had she gone off to make love? And whatever happened to her mate's corpse" (65–66)? From this time onward, a reappearing image of the cat killed by him shatters the peace of the narrator's mind:

From that night until now, I haven't slept a wink. Wherever I go, whatever room I lie down in, all night long this merciless cat moans and calls to his mate in his frightening voice (66).

In another instance, when the narrator wonders that, "the looks in Nazi's eyes were the most meaningful of all, sometimes so reflecting human feelings as to make one wonder, 'what thoughts and feelings are floating around in this furry head, behind these mysterious green eyes'" (65) we are reminded of the same question put forward with regard to the old man of *The Blind Owl*. The old man, like this cat, disturbs the sleep of the narrator of the novella. He says, "it seems to me that this man's face has figured in most of my nightmares. What crass, obstinate ideas have grown up, weed-like, inside that shaven greenish skull under its embroidered turban, behind that low forehead" (53–54)? A source of this reappearing image whether of a cat or of the old man, evidently, has to be looked for somewhere else.

*Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* is the story of a young wife who falls in love with one of her husband's workers and will be involved in fearful crimes in order to go on with her love affairs. Overwhelmed by passion, Katerina, a merchant's wife, is so possessed by her love of Sergey that, like Lady Macbeth of the Shakespearean play, she becomes void of every human emotion. Not heeding anything but her whims, and ready to pay any price in gratifying them, she becomes the very devil embodied. As to the allusion of the title to Shakespeare's play, Katerina's character has to be the focal point. She is the responsible party for drawing Sergey into committing murders. The first murder is committed by her poisoning her father-in-law. The second and third killings are planned by her and executed with Sergey's collaboration, a collaboration enforced by her. The third killing, that of Fedya Lyanin, is evidently the one the title of the story alludes to. Fedya, whose innocence is conveyed by the fact that he is a small child, is like Shakespeare's Duncan in his three characteristics. He is a guest in the house, the kinsman to Katerina's husband, and the lord of the properties of Katerina's deceased husband and father-in-law. By killing this innocent child, during which, "for four minutes there was a sepulchral silence in the room" (35), it is peace that is killed. Peace, thenceforward, leaves Katerina's world. There is no other way open to her but to be drowned in deeper crimes. Like Lady Macbeth who becomes a sleepwalker, she, too, becomes exposed to the recurring images of a blinded cat, who is nobody but her father-in-law.

There is a view in the study of Shakespeare that Lady Macbeth is part of her husband, the devilish part of him. When she dies and Macbeth is informed of it, he changes, becoming, again, a man, drawing our sympathies by his most poetic soliloquy in the play. It is only with his wife's death that Macbeth finds his humanity again. After the death of the ethereal girl in the first section of *The Blind Owl*, a sensation of peace takes possession of the narrator. "As I looked upon those closed eyes," he explains the sensation: "it was as though the demon which had been torturing me, the incubus which had been oppressing my heart with its own paw, had fallen asleep for a while" (19–20).

Macbeth's response to the news of his wife's death is pessimistic. Now he is a different person, poetic and courageous. He has come to understand the tragic destiny of man and his tragic existence. He is now reminded of mortality. After the blindness and murdering of his wife in the second section, a demon awakens in the narrator of *The*

*Blind Owl*. He laughs a trembling laugh, perhaps at the baseless foundations of existence, or at the absurdity revealed to him of human existence.

By the ethereal girl's death before any sexual act the narrator's demon leaves him, and by committing the act, it reawakens. By thus pointing to the devilish pollution generated by woman, existence itself, made possible by the female element is cursed. Continuation of existence which is nothing but pain is broken by omission of that female element which results in suffering leaving the world. It is here that the ambivalent attitude of *The Blind Owl*'s narrator towards women shows itself, an attitude shared in fact by some other narrators of Hedayat's stories. Hedayat, in his personal life, and his narrator of *The Blind Owl* conduct and present an adoring and even worshipful behaviour toward women, yet, they never forget that if there had not been that dear being, there would not have been continuation of existence and suffering as a result of that existence. The reader is reminded of the fate of the stray dog in a short story of Hedayat of the same name that lost the paradise of its master's house in following a female scent, and ended in misery and death as a result. Therefore, it is not the woman herself who is cursed, because she is also a partner in enduring the suffering created through her, taking an even larger share of the burden in comparison to male sufferers, and this gives pain to Hedayat. Woman is the bearer of existence's will to continue itself.

Katerina is the strong and steadfast partner in satisfying her passions, to the point not only sacrificing her married life, but even to the killing of five people, Sonetka and herself included. She is called a "snake" by her husband (24). Sergey, the opportunist and doubtful partner in the crimes, recognises the force of her impulses after the first killing: "I know what love is," says Sergey to Katerina, "and how, like a *snake*, it sucks your blood" [*italics mine*] (17). To kill her husband Zinoviy, she prepares him a samovar of "poisoned tea" (26). By committing suicide in an act of revenge, she is bitten by a snake herself. All these have their correspondences in *The Blind Owl*. Perhaps the whole story has an iconized representation in the act of the wife's biting the narrator's lip. "Her hair, redolent of champac, clung about my face, and a cry of anguish and joy burst forth from the depths of our beings. Suddenly I felt that she was biting my lip savagely, so savagely that she bit it through" (126). Nazi and her mate, in *Three Drops of Blood* [Hedayat, 1978b] have the same joyous moans.

If the three drops of blood, from which the title is formed, have any reference to the three murders in *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, we may take the reference as a spring board to finding other points of relations. Katerina, to save her lover, and secure their being together, murders her father-in-law. Afterwards, whenever she is in bed with Sergey, a cat that is indeed her father-in-law, appears in her dreams and disturbs her peace of mind. At least two appearances of this sort are related in detail. The first time the cat shows up, "where did the cat come from" Katerina asked herself in her nightmarish dream. ... "Is it really a cat?" She suddenly felt panicky and both sleep and dream vanished" (13). In the second instance, Katerina is sound asleep after her love-making with Sergey when the cat reappears and identifies himself to Katerina:

'What sort of cat do you think I am? It's very smart of you, Katerina dear, to take me for a cat at all. Actually, I'm Boris Timofeyevich, a highly esteemed *merchant* of this town and your father-in-law. Only one thing is wrong with me; my bowels have burst because of the fine treatment my dear daughter-in-law gave me. *That's why I mew*. You see,

I've shrunk and look like a cat to those who have no idea who I really am [*Italics mine*] [Leskov, 1961, 19–20].

At the end of the story, the cat, once more and together with the heads of the other two murdered persons reappear from the waves of the sea, increasing her anguish in that desperate situation.

The relations between the sense of guilt and reappearing image of the cat mewing in Leskov's story and *Three Drops of Blood* need not to be elaborated upon. As to *The Blind Owl*, the image of woman as ever offering her love in the symbol of the morning glory flower (continuation of existence?) is depicted in her various faces, be it Katerina, Sonetka or Fiona. Katerina goes to the point of murdering and drawing others to murder for her love. At the end her "errant gaze" being fixed and wild (50) reminds us of the reproaching eyes of the ethereal girl. Lovely Sonetka takes love as a play in the beginning, and being happy with it, continues the game. Fiona is the noblest of the three. She "was the personification of the simplicity of the typical Russian woman who is too lazy to say 'Go away' to a man, and who only knows that she is a woman" (41). All of them end among the convicts, travelling their way to their penal colony. In that colony, and amongst the convicts, Fiona and Katerina are "both equal- Fiona who could not resist the call of love from whomever it might come, and Katerina, who was acting the last scene in the drama of love" (47).

There are more instances of similarity between *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and *The Blind Owl*. In one instance, she, "laughed and kissed Sergey passionately before her husband's eyes" (25), suggesting Katerina's "bitchiness", as the narrator in *The Blind Owl* attributes his wife with. In another instance, the act is repeated by Sergey towards Sonetka, embracing her, "before everyone and gave her a loud kiss" (48).

The tone becomes philosophical when the woman is, in all her images, revealed to be a *Lakateh* "the bitch". It is this attitude that constitutes two of the main themes in *The Blind Owl*: the existence as a penal colony and the woman, in her beloved or mother figures, as the "bitch". She is the responsible part, or the force to existence that through her the Will to Live ensures its continuity. Without her body and offered flower, represented in the sweetest forms, existence would be extinct; by none coming to being the suffering will end:

The drum beat: tra-ta-ta-ta, and the convicts, chained and unchained, tumbled into the yard, Sergey, Fiona, Sonetka, Katerina, a sectarian chained to a Jew, a Pole on the same chain as a Tartar. ...

In these hellish, heart-rending sounds, which put the finishing touches to this picture, one could catch the voice of the wife of the Biblical Job: 'Cursed be the day wherein you were born' [Leskov, 1961, p. 47].

The allusion to a Schopenhauerian penal colony is explicit. This may account for the narrator in *The Blind Owl* seeking death as the comforter. The morbid attitude of the narrator reveals itself best when he says, "we are children of death and it is death that rescues us from the deceptions of life" (100). Leskov further adds,

He who does not wish to hear these words, he who is not tempted by the thought of death even in such mournful circumstances, but is frightened by it, must try to drown these howling voices by something still more hideous. The ordinary man knows this very well: he gives free play to his animal simplicity, he begins to play the fool, to jeer at him-

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self, at other people, at human feelings. Not particularly tenderhearted, he becomes doubly spiteful.

The narrator in *The Blind Owl* who feels himself like a lonely noble prisoner caught amongst the rabble, by becoming one of them in the symbolic act of love-making and being bitten by the snake during the act, finds a demon awakened in him.

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### **Information about the Author**

*Jalil Nozari*, Independent Researcher, Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature

### **Информация об авторе**

*Джалил Нозари*, независимый исследователь, специалист по сравнительному литературоведению

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