

# Postmodern Influence in Contemporary Persian Literature

Kamelia Talebian Sedehi  
University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

**Abstract**—In late 20<sup>th</sup> century postmodernism flourished in Europe and influenced many eastern writers, especially Iranian writers. In Iran, postmodernism began with Bahram Sadeghi; however, none of the literary critics considered Sadeghi and his followers as postmodern writers (Taslami, 2004, p. 80). This article intends to focus on some of the Iranian writers such as Moniroo Ravanipoor, Siroos Shamisa, Aboutorab Khosravi then, it will trace some of the postmodern features in their stories. One can trace magical realism, fragmentation, merging of reality and fiction which are the most important features of postmodernism in the selected writers' short stories.

**Index Terms**—postmodernism, Iranian short story, postmodern features

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article intends to focus on six Iranian writers and shed light on one of their short stories. It intends to give information about Persian literature and the way postmodernism mingles with it. The six selected writers are contemporary Iranian Writers; i.e. they are born in 20<sup>th</sup> century. As postmodernism has too many different features; i.e. the features which critics like Ihab Hassan mentioned for postmodernism, some of the features which are more repetitive in the selected short stories come into consideration in this article.

For the first time in 1870, John Watkins Chapman used the term postmodernism in order to describe the paintings of his era which were different from the classical paintings. The term postmodernism was used in literature in 1960s and got its climax in 1980s; however, "most of the literary historians believed that postmodernism has started since 1960 and at the same time one can forget about the date, for example, the reader finds a novel which was written in 1950s and had postmodernist features" (Payande, 2003, p. 153). Not only political, social and economical events but also events such as world wars, loss of faith, disbelief in grand narratives especially Christianity, Kennedy's assassination, consumerism and the presence of media led to the advent of postmodernism in literature. As literary texts reflect historical, social and political events of each period (Tadayoni, 2009, p. 24), American and European writers intend to write and reflect people's doubts, terror and horror in postmodern era.

Critics such as Ihab Hassan, Linda Hutcheon, David Lodge and John Barthes presented their theories on postmodernism and applied them to literary works. Unlike inappropriate social, historical and political situations for this school of thought, many eastern writers, especially Iranian writers, supported postmodernism and wrote their own works. Based on the theorists' idea, the most important features of postmodernism are "ontology, disorder in time sequence, paranoia, uncertainty, loss of identity,..." (Tadayoni, 2009, p. 27-28). However Ihab Hassan asserted that postmodernism, like other schools of thought, does not have a fixed meaning; therefore, there is no unanimity of votes about its meaning among the critics (Yazdanjoo, 2002, p. 99).

The term 'postmodernism' was first used in the 1960s by literary critics such as Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan, who noted the erupt of the modernist movement and tried to characterize what was coming next. During the early and mid 1970s the term gained a wider currency, encompassing first architecture, the dance, theater, painting, film, and music, and then contemporary culture and society as a whole (emphasis added, Simons and Billig, 1994, p. 15)

In the avalanche of articles and books that have made use of the term since the late 1950s postmodernism has been applied to a wide different levels of conceptual abstraction to a wide range of objects and phenomena in what we used to call reality (emphasis added, Bertens, 1995, p. 3)

This article intends to focus on the advent of postmodernism in Persian short stories From Bahram Sadeghi to Simin Daneshvar, Goli Taraghi, Shahrnoosh Parsipoor, Siroos Shamisa, Moniroo Ravanipoor, and Aboutorab Khosravi. These writers wrote different novels and short stories and this article will shed light on one of the short stories of each writer and then focus on its postmodernist features.

As Ihab Hassan mentioned postmodernism has so many different features:

### **Modernism**

Romanticism/ Symbolism  
Form (conjunctive, closed)  
Purpose  
Design  
Hierarchy

### **Postmodernism**

Pataphysics/ Dadaism  
Antiform (disjunctive, open)  
Play  
Chance  
Anarchy

Mastery/ Logos	Exhaustion/ Silence
Art object/ Finished work	Process/performance/happening
Distance	Participation
Creation/ Totalization	Decreation/ Deconstruction
Synthesis	Antithesis
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/ Boundary	Text/ Intertext
Semantics	Rhetoric
Paradigm	Syntagm
Hypotaxis	Parataxis
Metaphor	Metonymy
Selection	Combination
Root/ Depth	Rhizome/ Surface
Interpretation/ Reading	Against Interpretation/ Misreading
Signified	Signifier
Lisible (Readerly)	Scriptible/ Writerly
Narrative/ Grand Histoire	Anti-narrative/ Petite Histoire
Master Code	<u>Ideolect</u>
Symptom	Desire
Type	Mutant
Genital/ Phallic	Polymorphous/ Androgynous
Paranoia	Schizophrenia
Origin/ Cause	Difference-Difference/ Trace
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinancy	Indeterminancy
Transcendence	Immanence (Hassan, 1985, p. 123)

This article will focus on some postmodernist features like fragmentation, open ending, and shattering of the boundaries of fiction and reality.

## II. ANALYSIS

Bahram Sadeghi (1936- 1984) was born in Esfahan. The most important theme of his stories is the absurdity of urban life. He wrote *Teaching at Stirring Spring* in 1962. From the very beginning, the narrator addresses the reader and asks him/her to follow the narrator throughout the story in fact, "The narrator's presence and his dialogue with the reader is an important factor in the story" (Abedini, 1990, p. 220). "Let's assume, if you agree, that both of us are in the class" (Sadeghi, 1970, p. 204). From the beginning, the reader is engaged in all the events and the repetition of "we" and "you" emphasize the reader's engagement in the story. Then, the narrator emphasizes the fact that it is just a story and it is not the real life "do you prefer the story to be more formal and near to reality" (Sadeghi, 1970, p. 204)? Mahmoodi asserts that "postmodern writers know that the story is the reflection of the illusion of reality. Sadeghi mocks at reality and believes that the whole reality is just an imagination" (Mahmoodi, 1998, p. 169). This style of story telling reminds the reader of *If a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979) by Italo Calvino; in this novel the narrator addresses the reader repeatedly and asks him/her to follow the story. In *Teaching at Stirring Spring* the reader assumes that there is a class in which students are present, but the teacher is late, neither the students nor the teacher see each other, the faces are like shadows and when the students leave the class, the teacher only sees their ghostly movement and even "those who sit in the first rows can not see the teacher" (Sadeghi, 1970, p. 206).

The story reflects the disintegrated mind and the identity crisis which the western postmodern writers emphasize in their works. In the class, the only visible person is a blonde, blue eyed girl who fascinates all the students ;however, this fascination is not as vulgar as postmodern love, all the students think about "her sensual lips" and even the narrator imagines her dancing and asks the reader whether she should continue dancing. The reader follows the story until the blonde girl intends to leave the class because she does not want "him to wait" for her; therefore, she is the first student who leaves the class and the identity of the boy remains ambiguous to the end of the story. The teacher is not aware of the students' absence and only at the end of the story understands that no one stays in the class except an old man.

Sadeghi "expresses painful satire in his works and this satire deals with human beings who have different physical and mental problems" (Mahmoodi, 1998, p. 169). In this story, the narrator addresses the reader and it emphasizes the fictional nature of the story. Moreover, postmodern love and identity crises are the most important features of postmodernism which are represented in this story. The presence of postmodern features maintains that although literary critics do not consider Sadeghi as a postmodern writer, one can consider him as the father of postmodernism in Persian literature.

Bahram Sadeghi's works and style influenced later writers and one of them is Simin Daneshvar. Simin Daneshvar (1921- 2011) was born in Shiraz. She was the first woman writer who wrote Persian stories professionally. She wrote *a City like Heaven* in 1981 and *the Man who Does not Return* is chosen from this book.

This fragmented story deals with Mohtaram and Ebrahim's life who live with their two sons, Mammady and Ahmadi. In many cases, nineteenth and twentieth century writers focused on one character in a specific situation, and the writer represented the protagonist in one moment rather than following him through different times" (Taheri, 2000, p. 75) ; however, based on Lodge's view, postmodern stories "do not have any unity" (Payande, 2003, p. 165). In the first fragment, Mohtaram looks for her husband, but she returns home hopelessly. The second fragment of the story is devoted to the characters' past; when Mohtaram was a young woman and got married to Ebrahim. The third part of the story deals with the hopeless narrator who asks the reader to choose an ending among the narrator's suggestions; however, at the end the narrator decides that Ebrahim should return home and wait her. The story is fragmented and it reminds the reader of *Snow White* (1967) by Donald Bartheleme which was written in fragments too.

In the third part of the story, the narrator confesses that all the events are fiction and there is no reality. Postmodernist works "destroy the boundaries of reality and fiction" (Payande, 2003, p. 167). At the same time "Mohtaram's story is finished" (Daneshvar, 1982, p. 154) and the narrator asks the reader to choose among the suggestions for the ending of the story. Therefore, one concludes that unlike the classic stories in which the narrator ends the story himself and dominates the whole process of writing, in this story the reader cooperates with the narrator and it is one of the features of postmodernism because "postmodern novels do not have a fixed ending" (Payande, 2003, p. 161). The narrator asks some questions "should I oblige her to break her children's piggy bank? Is it good to permit her to go to the police officer? Should I force her to work as a servant" (Daneshvar, 1982, p. 155)? These questions keep out the story from its classic works and emphasize uncertainty. In the classic stories, the story shows the writer's dominance over the story. One should notice that in Daneshvar's works "events or characters' destiny are not important, but the most important feature is revealing new and invisible aspects of life which attract the reader's attention" (Payande, 2003, p. 46).

In this story, features like fragmentation, laying bare the device and open ending are represented which are the important features of postmodernist works. Goli Taraghi (1939), was born in Tehran, wrote a book named *I Am Chgvara* which was published in 1969. *The Journey* is selected from this book.

This story deals with a professor whose leg is amputated from his knee by a surgery. Horror dominates the whole story and magical realism plays an important role in the story. When the narrator says "all his parts of body are disintegrated" (Taraghi, 1969, p. 49) strange event takes place which never happens in reality. Epistemological questions are asked in the story which relates it to the modernist stories. Brian McHale notices that postmodernist works deal with ontological questions whereas modernist works focus on epistemological questions (1987, p. 8-9). The professor murmurs "sir, non-existence exists or non-existence does not exist? Existence was first nothing or it was always everything" (Taraghi, 1969, p. 50)? In this part, he asks ontological questions. In fact, ontology deals with species, their hierarchies and their differences and similarities.

The story is full of magical realism and when the reader continues reading, he notices this feature "their dried faces are like old and frozen mummies" (Taraghi, 1969, p. 53). All the descriptions reflect the main character's horror when he deals with the horror of amputation. When he intends to describe his father in law's exhaustion, he declares "all his parts of body are disintegrated, it is as if with the first wind his head will be cut and his hands and feet will be fallen on the ground" (ibid. 49).

Besides, the repetition of the word "suspicious" gives mysterious atmosphere to the story. The main character asks philosophical questions and he does not have any communication with others that is the reason why their movement is disgusting to him; therefore, he asks philosophical, epistemological and ontological questions and the more he asks the more he dives into uncertainty. As the result of social and political development and the advent of philosophical views, short stories focus on human beings and their position in the world" (Mastoor, 2005, p. 4). "Everything turns around him and he goes down and down with crabs, he moves his hands and feet in order to come to the surface, but he cannot" (Taraghi, 1969, p. 55), in this part the boundary between reality and dream is blurred. When he is frightened he thinks that he is changed into a "cow" or a "crab". His foot is amputated, but he pretends that this event is not important to him, but one can trace the sign of his lost identity as the result of his lost foot in his unconscious. He feels lonely "and his loneliness reflects modern man's situation that sees himself alone at the center of the universe" (Dehbashi, 2004, p. 230). Dehbashi believes that "existentialism dominates the whole story" (ibid. 286) and existentialism is related to epistemology. As mentioned before, horror dominates the story and this horror is related to existentialism because the man sees himself alone that is the reason why this story deals with "philosophical disappointment" (ibid. 297), i.e. there is no help for the characters in the universe.

In 1991, Siroos Shamisa (1948-) ,who was born in Rasht and wrote many different books and articles, wrote *The Mirror and Three Other Stories* and this article will discuss *The Mirror*. From the very beginning, uncertainty and doubt dominate the story when the narrator suspects his wife and intends to know her secrets. The doubt atmosphere covers the story; however, at the end the reader cannot understand anything. As the result of the presence of too many spies in the society in late 20<sup>th</sup> century, doubt and uncertainty were dominant in western postmodernist literature. Moreover, there were too many illegal institutions that worked very easily. In this story, the narrator acts like a detective and intends to unravel the truth in order to know whether his wife betrays him or not. The events take place in

dreamy-real world and the borders between them are blurred. For example, the narrator maintains that “even once I saw the rooster prays and it seems that the rooster cries and I get happy as the result of his cry, I can never forget that event” (Shamisa, 1991, p. 11). Not only the boundaries between reality and dream, but also the boundaries between the genders are broken “some hens like roosters” enter the story or when the fortune teller went to the door “(he) saw a man and when (he) called him, he turned and (he) saw the disgusting face of a woman” (ibid. 13). Even the doubt that the fortune teller and the woman are the same remains ambiguous to the end of the story and it reflects the postmodernist world in which many questions remain unanswered.

As it is mentioned before, the narrator acts like a detective to unravel his wife’s betrayal; however, the fortune teller is more interesting for him and the narrator intends to know his secrets.

Besides, the magical realism adds to the effect of uncertain atmosphere of the story. When the narrator says “people talk about the weather in their stories, but they are disappeared and they went to the sky like smoke” (ibid. 14); this sentence, unconsciously, reminds the reader of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) by Gabriel Garcia Marquez who is the master of the magical realism, in his novel one of the characters suddenly go to the sky, disappear and do not return to the story; “this story reveals new ways of connection with outside world of the story and outside world of the language” (Yazdanjoo, 2002, p. 39).

One can notice the identity crisis in the story too “the fortune teller had a wife whose name was Soofieh, perhaps. It is not clear who she was, where she was born or when she died” (Shamisa, 1991, p. 14). In fact, the identity crisis and perplexity belong to modernist stories that are strengthened in postmodernist stories; western people who passed two world wars and became familiar with Darwin’s theory of natural selection and Freud’s theory of the fragmentation of the mind, knew that their existence is fragmented. Brian McHale in postmodernist fiction emphasizes the importance of the theme of love and death in postmodernist stories (1987, p. 219-232). As death dominates European society, it enters the stories; moreover, love whether pure or sensual is emphasized in postmodernist stories. In this story, some women are prostitutes. The narrator suspects his wife; however, at the end of the story he swears that his wife is innocent and his wife is opposite of prostitutes “in the third stage of that house, there was a prostitute who dances all the time and it is not clear whether she was the fortune teller’s wife or his daughter” (Shamisa, 1991, p. 15). “People said paradoxical things about her and even they said that she was a lesbian” (ibid. 15). As the story continues, mirror imagery is strengthened “at the center of the mirror, there was an ambiguous space like a meadow that no one never goes there” (ibid. 37). Mirror is an image which is repeated in Borges’ stories and it is the symbol of infinity. In this story, mirror indicates the infinity too and the narrator is entangled in the mirror. At the end of the story, the narrator loses his identity in the mirror and he is fascinated by the endless space of the mirror. Not only the mirror, but also the image of allies and their twists are the same images that Borges uses to imply infinity. To the end of the story, magical realism and the blurring of reality and fiction are repeated which add to the suspicion and at the end the narrator cannot get out of the mirror. The reader is confused at the end of the story because it is not clear how the narrator enters the mirror and how he cannot get out of it. Even the reader does not know where the boundary of reality and fiction is and even he does not know whether there is any boundary between them or not.

Aboutorab Khosravi (1956) was born in Fasa. His works tend to surrealism and postmodernism. He wrote *Havyh* in 1991 and *Nightly Nightmares* is selected from this book. From the beginning of the story, the choice of each character’s name attracts the reader’s attention. “Borhani (Reasoning) was a mystic, Sotoude (Appreciated) was the shafiite muslim and Rasekh (Determined) was paradoxical” (Khosravi, 1991, p. 41). In the characters’ name and their point of view, there is a big contrast. The mystic approaches God by love; however, reasoning approaches God by reason. Here love and reason put together and these names clarify the way these people believe in the truth of death. In fact, “Nightly Nightmares” is the story in which death dominates the whole story. All the characters talk about Fathi’s death, but none of them knows “how he died”; therefore, suspicion dominates the story; moreover, Sotoude blurs the boundaries of death and life “he was sure that Fathi will return and solve the problem” (ibid. 42). The metamorphosis is another feature of this story as Rasekh sees Fathi turned into a ram. Besides, one can notice blurring of the boundaries of reality and dream in the following conversation:

I said: “Mr. Fathi, it seemed that you were dead”.

Borhani said: “death is not real”.

Rasekh laughed and said: “Mr. Fathi, it seems that I killed you” (ibid. 44).

Alive people talked to the dead man and boundaries of death and life, reality and dream are shattered and at last, the reader does not understand the real reason of Fathi’s death.

Besides these writers, Shahrnoosh Parsipoor (1945), who received the price at the 18<sup>th</sup> feminist conference in the United States as the selected writer, wrote *The Heat in the Year Zero* in 2003 and *A Good Place* is chosen from this book. The story begins simply and mysterious and surprising events portrayed normally. For example, Ghashange cleans the room and suddenly she sees a man in the mirror; it is a kind of magical realism. Magical realism means that real events coalesced with strange and improbable events. The story continues in this way, then boundaries of reality and dream are blurred “the walls keep out until the space grows bigger and bigger” (Parsipoor, 2003, p. 40). In fact, no boundary is respected in this story and everything is chaotic and at the end of the story the reader is confused because he does not understand who the man was and what kind of relationship this man and woman had.

All the events entangled until Ghashange gets melancholic. From all around the house, there smells the smell of baby's corpse. In addition to the blurring of boundaries of reality and dream and the use of magical realism, fragmentation of the story adds to the reader's perplexity. "Reading postmodernist novel means facing the fragmented events and thoughts" (Payande, 2009, p. 99) which are the features of this short story. As it is mentioned, there are some writers whose works can be categorized as modernist and postmodernist simultaneously and Parsipoor is one of these writers. The features like fragmentation, blurring of reality and fiction, and magical realism are postmodernist, whereas Ghashange's melancholia is a modernist feature.

Moniroo Ravanipoor (1954), was born in Bushehr and most her stories take place in south of Iran too, wrote *Syria*, *Syria* in 2004 and *The Fourth Person* is selected from this book. The narrator starts the story with doubt "now he just wants to know the fourth person" (Ravanipoor, 2004, p. 101). From the first sentence on many questions come into the reader's mind, and then the mirror imagery indicates infinity. He hears three men's cry "the fourth person lives in the mirror" (ibid. 102). The narrator knows that these three men carry a coffin and ask the narrator to join them, but at the end of the story the reader does not understand whether they were dead who come into life or they were alive and carry a coffin. Even the narrator is frightened by their face and like postmodernist science-fiction stories, the narrator describes their smile "as a big hole in their face which intends to eat everything and he escapes [...] a smile which intends to explode and scatter everything" (ibid. 104).

Mirror imagery indicates infinity and Borgesian twisted corridors add to the uncertainty and doubt; therefore, the reader cannot understand whether these three men were human beings or the other species "and how long it takes to understand that these men were wooden" (ibid. 10). Moreover, from the narrator's body some plants grow. In this story which is a kind of science-fiction story, boundaries of reality and dream, and death and life are blurred.

In postmodernist literature, not only the boundaries between reality and dream but also the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism are blurred. In fact, "there is no precise line which separates modernism and postmodernism" (Yazdanjoo, 2002, p. 18). In fact, one can consider postmodernism as the follower of modernism; however, it is sometimes parody of modernism. There are many modernist writers who wrote postmodernist fictions too. In Iran, Ali Taslimi considers Moniroo Ravanipoor as both a modernist and a postmodernist writer (2004, p. 56). However, there are some other writers like Goli Taraghi who is considered as a modernist writer by the critics and the existence of postmodernist features in her works indicate that there is no certainty in the classification of writer's style of writing.

### III. CONCLUSION

As it is mentioned, postmodernism applied to different disciplines like, painting, cinema, and especially literature. American and European writers wrote about postmodern condition in their novels, short stories and poems. This article sheds light on the history of Iranian postmodernism from Bahram Sadeghi to Moniroo Ravanipoor. Payande believes that social, political and economical conditions in Europe and America lead to the development of postmodernism, whereas, in Iran the writers imitated western works; therefore, as a result of the lack of social and political conditions, postmodernism does not develop in Iran. "Blind imitation of the new style that does not have any cultural background in our country" is an obstacle in the development of Iranian postmodern literature; however, one should not ignore Iranian writers' attempt to found Iranian postmodernism in Iran (Payande, 2009, p. 122).

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**Kamelia Talebian Sadehi** was born in Ahwaz, Iran in 1987. She is PhD student of English Literature at University Putra Malaysia. She studied English literature and got her B.A. from University of Isfahan, Iran in 2009. Then, she continued the same major in M.A. and got her degree from University of Isfahan in 2011. She published two articles "*The Melancholic Subject and The Bluest Eye*" and "*Beloved and Kristevan Melancholic Subject*". She also attended some national and international conferences and presented her lectures. She is lecturer at University of Amin, Isfahan, Iran, and teaches English literature. Before that, she has published her articles under the name of Camelia Talebian Sadehi, but from now on, she will publish them under her passport name; Kamelia Talebian Sadehi.