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Death in the Prism of Existentialism: A
Comparative Reading of William Faulkner's *As I
Lay Dying* and Sadeq Chubak's *The Patient
Stone*

Rasoul Aliakbari

PhD student

Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta, Canada

rasoul@ualberta.ca

Abstract

In this article, I compare William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Sadeq Chubak's *The Patient Stone* with respect to the theme of death and from the perspective of Existentialism. I argue that despite Faulkner's influence on Chubak and similarities in their writings, the Iranian modernist novel presents intellectual and aesthetic nuances catering to the domestic material circumstances of its composition. While *As I Lay Dying* offers a pro- Sartrean and nihilistic notion of mortality, the Iranian novel features a pro- Heideggerian and *authenticating* view of death. I use this comparison in order to transcend the notion of modern Iranian literature as merely influenced by Western literary models.

Keywords: comparative literature, Iranian literary modernism, re-appropriation, Existentialism

1. Introduction and scope

It is customary to note that late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iranian fiction developed under influences from Western literary and philosophical schools. A cursory look at modern literature in Iran demonstrates the high degree to which Iranian authors looked to their European and American counterparts for narrative techniques. In his account of modern Iranian literature, Mohammad Ghanoonparvar shows that "the European education of some writers of this

period, such as [Mohammad-Ali] Jamalzadeh and [Sadeq] Hedayat, and their direct exposure to Western literature as well as access of writers to many Persian translations of Western works were influential factors in this new era in Persian literature” (8). In addition, Kamran Talattof provides a “Euro-Persianist” framework for modern Persian literature and affirms its emergent European orientation as Iranian literature moved from tradition to modernity by incorporating “Western” ideology (4).¹

One of the major sites of such a literary transaction is modernist fiction. As a characteristic example, Sadeq Chubak (1916-1998), the Iranian modernist author, was inspired by, among others, William Faulkner (1897-1962) in both his narrative style and intellectual inclinations (Aslani 15). Their similarities have been commonly pointed out. For instance, Safdar Taqizadeh highlights the emergence of English as the language of the oil industry in Southern Iran, also Chubak’s arena, and points to the influences of prominent English and American writers on Chubak’s work. Particularly, Taqizadeh maintains that “the influence from John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner is evident in Chubak’s later works especially in utilization of stream of consciousness and free association in *The Patient Stone*” (6; my translation). Particularly, his masterpiece *The Patient Stone* (1966) bears similarity to Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930). Like the American novel, Chubak’s is narrated in stream of consciousness and through shifting points of view. More importantly, both novels feature existentialist concerns and particularly foreground death as a central theme.

Despite these similarities, I argue that, compared to Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*, the Iranian novelist assumes a different approach toward the matter of death in *The Patient Stone*. Given the significance of death in these two works as well as its centrality in modern Existentialist thought, this article examines *As I Lay Dying* and *The Patient Stone* in the light of Existentialist philosophy with reference to such major figures as Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger. I argue that Faulkner’s novel is pro-Sartrean and features a nihilistic and absurdist view of death, according to which one’s past efforts in life are annulled once death arrives. My further contention is that, despite Faulkner’s influence on Chubak,

¹ For a discussion of Western influences on modern Iranian fiction, also see volume I of *Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi dar Iran [One Hundred Years of Story Writing in Iran]*.

The Patient Stone demonstrates a positive, pro-Heideggerian approach to mortality. As such, despite the conventional agreement that modern Iranian literature mainly derives from Western sources, this article seeks to demonstrate a major instance of modernist Persian fiction that is not a mere derivative or bearer of influence, but a literary and intellectual development within the particular domestic socio-political circumstances of its composition.

II. Pro-Sartrean death in *As I Lay Dying*

As I Lay Dying recounts the death and burial of Addie Bundren. Her will to be buried in her home town of Jefferson imposes a challenging journey on her family. The black comedy is narrated through the shifting viewpoints of the characters. The indolent father, Anse, considers the burial journey to be his chance to acquire false teeth in the town. Cash, the oldest son, shows his affection for his dying mother by constructing her coffin. Her other son, Jewel, has to sell his favorite horse in order to purchase the mule team for the wagon. And, while Dewey Dell, the family's only daughter, expects to end an unwanted pregnancy in that town, Darl, the second-oldest son, is consigned to an asylum in Jefferson.

As suggested in the synopsis, mortality as one of the major themes in *As I Lay Dying* propels the entire plot. Faulkner's treatment of death in this work has received extensive scholarly attention and has been regarded as a blind obsession that triggers mere disgust (Bassett 100).² Heidegger regards death as a precondition for the individual who seeks to pursue authenticity: "The running-ahead [toward death] reveals [...] the lost-ness into Oneself [i.e. public life] [...], Being itself, however, in the passionate freedom for death [...] has rid itself of the illusion of the One [i.e. everydayness], become factual, certain of itself, and full of anxiety" (266).³ He further argues that death anxiety motivates one to assume an authentic lifestyle, and thereby considers the ignorance of death as a method for resorting to a false, inauthentic life, which indicates one's failure to realize

² On Faulkner's treatment of death in *As I Lay Dying*, also see Visser, "Getting Ready to Stay Dead: Rites of Passage in William Faulkner's Novels."

³ On Heideggerian death and literary studies, also see Rybinska, "The Marginalization of Death in Culture Based on Selected Examples of Modern Literature and Philosophy" and Irwin, "Death by Inauthenticity: Heidegger's Debt To Ivan Il'ich's Fall."

that one is, irrespective of age, a being bound to death. While *As I Lay Dying* shares with existentialist schools of thought a preoccupation with death, to survey Faulkner's novel from a Heideggerian standpoint may not prove highly fruitful. It is not easy to find in *As I Lay Dying* the Heideggerian emphasis on anxiety as the harbinger of an authentic life in the face of death. For instance, the youngest of the Bundrens, Vardaman, who is mentally underdeveloped, associates his mother with the fish he has freshly caught and brought home for cooking. He has just witnessed his mother's decease and reflects on that as such:

Then I begin to run. I run toward the back and come to the edge of the porch and stop. Then I begin to cry. I can feel where the fish was in the dust. It is cut up into pieces of not-fish now, not-blood on my hand and overalls. Then it wasn't so. It hadn't happened then. And now she is getting so far ahead and I cannot catch her. [...] If I jump the porch I will be where the fish was, and it all cut up into not-fish now. (34)

Vardaman is impacted by his mother's recent death and associates it with fish imagery. The image of fish as not-fish brings to mind human being as non-human or non-existent due to the occurrence of death. The excerpt, it can be argued, features death as a denouement neutralizing one's past existence.

In addition, Heidegger argues for authenticity as it comes in the wake of realizing one's being bound toward death. Yet, to Sartre, mortality rings a different note. He acknowledges that human beings are exposed to finitude and that man should take action. However, unlike Heidegger, who postulates finitude as authenticizing *Dasein* (Heidegger's term for *human being*), Sartre conceives of death as highly erratic: "there is no place for death in being-for-itself" (*Being and Nothingness* 699). Counter-arguing Heidegger, Sartre continues that death cannot individualize since it is simply out of one's control. He regards death as a sheer absurd fact of life which is irreconcilable with one's life projects:

We have in fact every chance of dying before we have accomplished our task, or, on the other hand, of outliving it. There is therefore a very slim chance that our death will be presented to us as that of Sophocles was, for example, in the manner of a resolved chord. And if it is only *chance* which decides the character of our death and therefore of our life, then even the death which most resembles the end of a melody cannot be waited for as such; luck by determining it for me removes from it any character as a

harmonious end. [...] Thus this perpetual appearance of chance at the heart of my projects cannot be apprehended as *my* possibility but, on the contrary, as the nihilation of all my possibilities, a nihilation which *itself is no longer a part of my possibility*. [...] Thus death is never that which gives life its meaning; it is, on the contrary, that which on principle removes all meaning from life. (537-9, italics original) ⁴

Rather than meaning the summation of one's life, death dispels meaning from it, as one does not voluntarily determine one's own demise. That human beings are unavoidably approaching their death is also a major theme in *As I Lay Dying*. Though *Being and Nothingness* and *As I Lay Dying* appeared in 1943 and 1930, respectively, one may discern a pro-Sartrean approach in Faulkner's work. Although she is less concerned with her mother's decease than she is obsessed with her own unwanted pregnancy, Dewey Dell, too, contemplates the matriarch's demise. On the wagon to Jefferson, Dewey Dell finds the opportunity to reflect on what she perceives as her mother's early death and regrets that: "I heard that my mother is dead. I wish I had time to let her die. [...]. It is because in the wild and outraged earth too soon too soon too soon. It's not that I wouldn't and will not it's that it's too soon too soon too soon" (79). Dewey Dell's ruminations echo a pro-Sartrean conception of death as lying outside one's control and occurring arbitrarily. Addie's death, like any other death, disables preemptory action and removes her agency. Moreover, Darl, a highly perceptive character who can see through others' minds, tends to comment on life and death in a similar idiom. In the poetic language for which he becomes famous, he describes death as follows: "In a strange room you *must* empty yourself for sleep. And before you are emptied for sleep, what are you. And when you are emptied for sleep, you are *not*. And when you are filled with sleep, *you never were*" (51; emphasis added). The note that by death one does not exist, as if they had never existed before, is sufficient to suggest how one's life-long attempts are cancelled as death arrives. As such, Faulkner presents death, far from stimulating a

⁴ On the differences between Heidegger and Sartre on this issue, also see Gary Cox, "Heidegger and Sartre on Death." Also, for further elaboration on Sartre's notion of death in *Being and Nothingness*, see Lightbody, "Death and Liberation: A Critical Investigation of Death in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*."

Heideggerian authenticity, as an “unharmonious end” that relegates human beings to nothingness and annuls their life accomplishments.

In addition to his more theoretical accounts in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre presents his view of death as impending and negating, in his short story *The Wall*. Set in the Spanish Civil War and centered on the theme of death as inevitable, *The Wall* is the chronicle of the life of a political prisoner who is sentenced to death. Pablo, imprisoned with two others in the same cell, is awaiting execution at dawn. The realization that his life is irremediably destined toward death brings to naught his past concerns and experiences and renders them meaningless: “How madly I ran after happiness, after women, after liberty. [...] I took everything as seriously as if I were immortal. [...] “It’s a damned lie.” It was worth nothing because it was finished [...] death had disenchanting everything” (“The Wall” 11). A similar note of resignation is evident in *As I Lay Dying*. As their burial journey is about to start, the Bundrens learn that a flood has washed the county’s bridge away, and that they have to direct the wagon carrying Addie through a nearby ford. Yet the high waves overpower them and carry away Addie’s coffin. Though he was not the one to restore the floating coffin, Darl had prophesied, in his poetic style, the loss during the passage. Darl describes this scene as follows:

The river itself is not a hundred yards across, and Pa and Vernon and Vardaman and Dewey Dell are the only things in sight not of that single monotony of desolation leaning with that terrific quality a little from right to left, *as though we had reached the place where the motion of the wasted world accelerates just before the final precipice.*” (96; emphasis added)

Darl is describing the impending loss in the river; however, his statement, by a stretch of the simile, is also a commentary on the conditions of existence and mortality. No matter how hard one strives for one’s life matters, they are preordained to end up in loss, the most powerful agent for which is death, or so Darl tends to think. Darl’s description of the river is a reference to humanity’s worldly condition which is directed toward non-being. The “wasted world” speeds toward death or the “final precipice,” which looms large as an absurd verity that is perpetually awaiting one’s arrival in order to equalize his efforts into nothingness. Darl’s apocalyptic vision can be further appreciated considering his own intellectual and social death toward the end of the novel, as

his family committed him to Jackson asylum (176). It is thus plausible to refer to the Sartrean notion that “death, far from being my peculiar possibility, is a contingent fact which as such on principle escapes me and originally becomes my facticity” (*Being and Nothingness* 545). The statement is endorsed in Faulkner’s novel through the events that happen to major characters and their reflections on those events.

With regard to the theme of death preoccupation, a brief mention of Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* (1942) can further illuminate my point about Faulkner’s novel. *The Stranger* deals with human life understood in the light of mortality; it recounts the protagonist’s consciousness and its alterations as he contemplates the contingency of death. Meursault kills an Arab and feels nonchalant, yet now that he is facing the court verdict demanding his execution, he comes to reflect upon the life he had hitherto ignored. It is likely Meursault’s aim to build up his awareness of death that drives him to decline his right to appeal the court verdict (144). Nor is he interested in chaplain’s invitation to Christian repentance and denies the afterlife (151). The protagonist, contrariwise, grows thoroughly certain about his imminent death. The rage Meursault raised against the chaplain, in his own words: “washed me clean, rid me of hope; for the first time, in that night alive with signs and stars, [...] I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with howls of execration” (154). The major character finds no sense in his present existence, has lost hope for the future, and is expecting death.

The certainty of death and absurdity of hope, chief Camusian themes, occur in his predecessor’s novel, *As I Lay Dying*. Meursault must go through jurisprudence to realize and then muse on the verity of death, but this is something that Addie, the matriarch of Faulkner’s novel, has always known: “I could just remember that how my father used to say that the reason for living was to get ready to stay dead a long time” (114). The statement indicates Addie’s full awareness of mortality, which she had always anticipated. With her steadfast commitment to her father’s mindset, as she immediately acknowledges (118), she has fully realized that life is inescapably moving toward death and is always bereft of hope. Addie had never been content with her work teaching elementary school: “In the afternoon when the school was out and the last one had left with his little dirty snuffing nose, instead of going home, I would go down the hill to the spring where I could be quiet there then” (114). Nor was she passionate about

her marriage, which she regarded as unceremonious and brusque: “So I took Anse” (114). In fact, family life failed to distance her from pondering death, or to put her mind at ease. She used to think of Anse’s mediocre life as already dead, but “he did not know that he was dead, then” (118). Addie designates him, echoing Vardaman’s diction, as “not-Anse” (116-17). Above all, to her, “speech” is “voiceless,” and “words” are “dead” (118). For Addie, life is already in decline, lacks redemptive power, and is inherently absurd. As such, far from a realization of death as a certitude affecting her existential condition, Addie comes to view her entire life as absurdist and irrational: “But for me it was not over. I mean over in the sense of beginning and ending, because to me there was no beginning nor ending to anything then” (118). Addie has only one section to narrate (#40), yet within this limited space, she clearly demonstrates her view of death and finitude as impending and thus of irrationalism and absurdism as pervading the entire existence.

Consequently, Darl, along with his siblings, demonstrates the awareness that man is death-bound. His philosophical musings not only touch upon humanity’s incapability of guarding against the imminence of mortality, but also suggest the dissolution of one’s past efforts in the face of death. Beyond that, the matriarch’s discontentment with life and her failure to find redemption renders her existential condition absurd. Taking together the life of Addie and her children, it can be concluded that the dominant view of death in *As I Lay Dying* is pro-Sartrean. The Faulknerian legacy of aesthetic absurdism, however, is altered in the hands of Chubak. The following section demonstrates Chubak’s domesticated and nuanced treatment of fatality in *The Patient Stone*.

III. Chubak and a Pro-Heideggerian Death in *the Patient Stone*

Chubak, playwright, short-story writer and novelist, was born in Bushehr in southern Iran. He has obtained a high status in Iranian modernist literature, bringing together chief literary trends. Primarily, Chubak, along with two other avant-garde authors, Sadeq Hedayat and Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh, contributed to the democratization of Iranian fiction. The novel and the short story, being new forms in the literary landscape of Iran, differed from the earlier genres of anecdote and tale, which focused on aristocrats, and tended, unlike the

latter, to represent ordinary people.⁵ In this respect, Chubak particularly uses the common language of middle and lower classes in his fiction. In addition, he developed a familiarity with Western modernist fiction and attempted, successfully, to incorporate new narrative techniques in his writings. As an example, *The Patient Stone* is recounted in a stream of consciousness and from shifting narrative viewpoints. After his collection of stories *Kheymeh Shab Bazi* (*Puppet Show*) in 1945 and the subsequent collection *Antari Ke Lutyash Murdeh Bud* (*The Monkey Whose Master Had Died*) in 1949, he did not publish for fourteen years. His major novel, *Tangsir*, appeared in 1963, and two years later Chubak published *Rouze Avval-e Qabr* (*The First Day in the Grave*). His final novel, *Sang-e Sabour* (*The Patient Stone*), was released in 1966.

Viewed as one of the most representative works of Iranian modernist literature, *The Patient Stone* is the life story of a group of marginalized individuals in a neighborhood of Shiraz over several weeks in 1933. Gowhar, a major character, is lost, and the other characters maintain monologues about her, each one from their particular viewpoints. Gowhar was once the wife of the affluent merchant Haji Esma'il. Their only child, Kakolzari, had a nosebleed in the holy shrine of Shah Cheraq, which, according to superstition, was a sign of his mother's unfaithfulness. As a result, Haji Esma'il accused Gowhar of adultery and drove her and the child out of his house. A divorcee then, she had to earn money through short-term marriages to various men. The novel starts with Gowhar's being lost and ends with her body being discovered in the house of Seif O-Qalam, the psychotic physician who believes it is his divine mission to kill women he perceives as prostitutes. Like Gowhar, other characters too are subject to violence, rape and death to varying degrees. Superstition and lack of education lurk as destructive forces behind the characters' miseries.

The synopsis should suggest that death is a major theme in the novel. Also, in the opening, Ahmad, the protagonist, complains about recurrent earthquakes that hit Shiraz and worries that they may hit at any time and put an end to one's life:

⁵ For a survey on the emergence of the short story and novel and their replacement of the older genres of tale and anecdote in the Iranian literary scene, see volume I of *Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi Dar Iran* [*One Hundred Years of Story Writing in Iran*].

The ton of dirt on the roof would cave in on your head, and like a dirt beetle, your breath would be cut off; and all the time you would know there is no way in or out; and all the time you'd know that you're dying and can't do a thing about it; and up there, humans, donkeys, and cows would keep on grazing while the roots of the trees would be getting their fertilizers from your guts. Really, if the earth would open up its mouth and swallow the whole town, who'd have the nerve to say a word? (1)

Imagery of death pervades the novel from the very outset. In fact, the idea that death overpowers human beings is an intellectual puzzle for Ahmad at a few points in the novel. Conversant with Iranian history and literature, Ahmad dreams of a career in writing fiction. However, he often discusses this life project with puzzlement in his interior monologues: "How do I know that my writings won't get buried with me under the rubble? How much has already been buried in the earth since the world began? How much writing has been wiped out?" (2). As the above quotation may suggest, the protagonist seems unable to comprehend the contingency of human existence, which death overpowers and annuls. Ahmad's absurdist view of existence, which he expresses at a few points in the novel, initially suggests similarities to the Sartrean worldview described above. In addition, the grim imagery has led a number of critics to develop a negative picture of Chubak's novel. As an instance of the public discourse that formed about his novel, Chubak was condemned for what was perceived as his "nihilistic and suppressed worldview" (Mohammadi 7; my translation). Moreover, it has been stated that the characters in the novel "fall victim to their desires and helplessness and find no way out of the sinkhole they are stuck in. As if degeneration and corruption are giants nobody has the power to combat against" (Dastgheyb 87; my translation). As such, some commentators have identified Chubak with pessimism, and thereby downplayed his novel.

Despite the initial nihilistic gesture in the novel and the negative commentaries that it has triggered, my contention is that preoccupation with death must not blind readers to the invigorating and positive portrayal of existence between the lines in *The Patient Stone*. In other words, notwithstanding the novel's initial pro-Sartrean inclination, it uses the notion of mortality to throw a positive light on existence and to highlight the significance of taking up life projects, and thus takes a pro-Heideggerian approach to death. Rather than being

an object at hand or the completion of one's life, Heidegger argues, death is always impending and absolutely inevitable. The notion of death as impending is conspicuous in Chubak's novel: "As if we had such a quiet, carefree life before, now these damn quakes add new humps to our hunched backs, and morning to night, black death dances around in front of us" (9). Ahmad is perpetually facing death. Yet, to be in authentic relation to death is not to deny it, but rather to recognize its inevitability. To Heidegger, death is non-relational; one cannot die vicariously and, in a certain sort of inevitability, one has to die his own death: "No one can take the Other's dying away from him" (*Being and Time* 284). Heidegger urges one to always expect the certainty of death, for it "shatters all one's tenaciousness to whatever existence one has reached" (308). In addition, Heidegger sheds a positive light onto his account of mortality as he maintains that the prospect of death emancipates one from inauthenticity and everydayness in life; it "individualizes" one and drives the person to have a conduct "of its own accord."⁶ To a certain degree, the same positive attitude is evident in *The Patient Stone*. Ahmad's contemplations of death and earthquakes compel him, despite his erratic denials, to consider his distinct life plan – writing the story of Gowhar's life: "In the end, I will write it. But for now, just let the quakes finish" (2). It is only by writing stories that Ahmad can draw on his knowledge of Iran's past and present his view of the contemporary society, a project that sets him apart from his socially under-provided and morally unscrupulous milieu.

In addition, when certain about the inevitability of death, one finds oneself obligated to take action, as Heidegger maintains. In fact, in the face of death, one "frees itself for its world" and is finally "nothing else than *Being-in-the-world*" (*Being and Time* 344; emphasis in original). Rather than being a solitary entity, the individual is highly engaged in the communal world. The "resolute" individual, as Heidegger further holds, "does not detach Dasein from its world, nor does it isolate it so that it becomes a free-floating 'I.'" In a similar manner, Ahmad's frequent interior monologues about earthquakes and other things do not make him an introverted figure. In actuality, the young teacher possesses a

⁶ Heidegger's arguments about death are not highly clear and have been interpreted variously. In this article, I work from a certain understanding of Heideggerian death. For a lucid and comprehensive study of Heideggerian death, see Carol J. White, *Time and Death: Heidegger's Analysis of Finitude*.

pragmatic consciousness and is engaged in the real world to a high degree. As he asserts: “*I want to know the people. Do you think getting to know good and bad people is something to be sniffed at?*” (4; emphasis added). The protagonist thinks of his community as worthy of knowing and caring for. Additionally, as Seif O-Qalam, the psychotic doctor, exposes his fatal, secret plan of murdering street women, Ahmad counters severely: “you can’t kill everybody just because they’re poor or sick. You should cure them. Obviously, something’s wrong with your brain” (20). Arguing against the plot and referring to the deprived condition of the community, Ahmad continues: “The school principal, all the teachers, Sheikh Mahmoud the engraver, they’re all beggars. So, should everybody be killed? A plague on the University you came out of!” (21). Ahmad has developed a highly sensitive morality and is intolerant of the physician’s fanaticism. Above all, Ahmad’s love for Gowhar and his identification with her son Kakolzari demonstrate his extension of affection and humane care toward his companions, independent of his personal intellectual preoccupations. As such, contemplating death does not estrange Ahmad from his interpersonal and communal life.

As indicated, Heidegger argues that death may arrive at any moment, but it is not just here with us yet; therefore, it is also indefinite. That death is not currently happening and is yet always open as a possibility poses a “constant threat,” leading to anxiety (310). “The courage for anxiety in the face of death” (254), as Heidegger views it, “reveals in human Being the *Being* for ownmost Being-able-to-be, i.e., the *Being Free* for the freedom to choose and grasp ourselves” (188; emphasis original). The German existentialist deems anxiety as inducing one’s adoption of a distinct life project, through which their inner potentials are realized. In the face of death, Ahmad too is preoccupied with anxiety. He describes his life at the outset of the novel as “All anxiety” (1). His angst emerges in the form of an interior self that maintains dialogue with him. During their dialogues about the earthquakes and writing, the inner self encourages Ahmad to take up his project:

Get up, get this big carcass of yours out of bed. Do something worthwhile. What are you good for, anyway? Get up and write a little. From the very beginning you’ve been saying that you want to be a writer. But you haven’t done a damn thing. Didn’t you say you want to write something about Gowhar’s life? Maybe all of a sudden you’ll get buried under the rubble, who knows. At least do something that’ll survive you. (2, italics in original)

Despite his initial refusals, Ahmad ultimately submits to his interior's urging. In a Heideggerian mood and move, he decides to recoil from passivity and introversion, and to embark on his authentic career of writing. His anxiety brings him back to his distinct life project, which he describes metaphorically: "I can't walk with this belly any more. [...] I've got to pour out everything in my head. I've got to let out everything inside me. I've got to deliver. All right, I'll write for you, my friend, my double" (26). Consequently, in place of fear - which is the inauthentic mood that Existentialists renounce - Ahmad undergoes a generative type of anxiety that is conducive to literary creativity. Death as an inevitable possibility awakens people to their committed actions in the world, and drives them to take hold of their lives and to orchestrate it according to their own vision. Only by coming to terms with death can Dasein be "*fully assigned to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being*" (*Being and Time* 294, italics in original). As an authentic being, Ahmad is not a merely solitary and subjective contemplator on death. In response to death, on the contrary, he becomes socially engaged and committed to realizing his potential as "the writer of the destitute" (38), of Gowhar and the downtrodden neighbourhood.

Ahmad eventually realizes his potential for creation and pens a few plays, scenes of which are included in *The Patient Stone*. Ahmad's mythological play that concludes the novel is pertinent to the concept of death, and especially thematically significant, as it tells of humanity's rebellion against gods and the ensuing demise of deity. The play dramatizes the creation of Mashya and Mashyaneh and their rebellion against the gods.⁷ Zervan, hideous and malevolent, and Ahriman, attractive and benevolent, are the two gods in charge of the universe. Zervan has created Mashya but, much to his creature's dismay and irritation, has always neglected him in his boring life. Zervan even begrudges Mashya his beautiful female partner, Mashyaneh, and has imprisoned her. Even so, Mashya tends to be "ignorant, presumptuous, and bull-headed" (156). With the help of other creatures, Mashya ultimately succeeds in freeing Mashyaneh after both of them had eaten the fruit of "the tree of knowledge." Their escape

⁷ Mashya and Mashyaneh are figures in Persian mythology corresponding to Adam and Eve. For a discussion of Mashya and Mashyaneh, also see Sinha, *The Persian World; Understanding People, Polity and Life in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan*.

also uncovers the key to Zervan's death. The glass of Zervan's life is unearthed from under the tree of knowledge and is immediately broken, and the god's life thus comes to an end. The play (and the novel) concludes: "Only the TREE OF KNOWLEDGE remains green and fresh, in place; and from behind it, the sun bills out of the ground, its warm and bloody flames shining on MASHYA and MASHYANEH (183; emphasis in original). As part of his distinct life project in writing, which he takes up out of his anxiety about death, Ahmad treats the theme of death in his play, directing its destructive aspect against the gods and thereby offering the characters their deserved agency and freedom of action.

The mythological play is important from still another perspective. Friedrich Nietzsche, a major antecedent of Heidegger,⁸ famously announced the death of God: "Where is God? God is Dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" (120). Nietzsche's announcement conveys a fundamental point about the circumstances of existence; he is in denial of "the existence of absolute and universal values" (Copleston 35), mandated by the cultural and political status quo.⁹ In the same token, and given the overall context of the novel, the dramatic mythology of the death of deity suggests the renunciation of absolute values that dictate one's existence including, or particularly, the contingency of a project-oriented writer such as Ahmad. In other words, and more particularly, through writing Ahmad refuses to submit to, and rebels against, the conventional and traditional literary models of his time. Primarily, the theme of rebellion and deity dismissal is evident from his flouting traditional literary conventions of literary verbosity. In his thought process for writing down Gowhar's life story, Ahmad displays stylistic self-consciousness, and satirizing the dominant trend in his time of bombastic cliché stories about upper-class lovers, he concludes:

After all, the country needs all kinds of people; it needs both the writers of affluent ladies and affluent gentlemen and the writers of beggars. If I am to be a writer, I'll be the writer of beggars. [The former writers] know

⁸ The complex relationship between Nietzsche and Heidegger is not directly related to the topic of this article. See Louis P. Blond, *Heidegger and Nietzsche: Overcoming Metaphysics*.

⁹ For further elaboration on Nietzsche's death of deity and the subsequent freedom of the individual, see Michael Lackey, "Killing God, Liberating the 'Subject.'"

nothing of Gowhar and Jahansoltan, nor even that such creatures exist, let alone about their language. (38)

He satirizes decorous literary conventions at length and finally realizes, as his distinct aesthetic vision, writing about the ordinary people in his community in their own language.

In addition, the mythological play can also suggest, on a different level, denial of dominant traditional thought systems, and particularly of religious dogmatism, which would vouchsafe women's insecure and temporary matrimonies in the novel. Arguing against Sheikh Mahmoud, Ahmad condemns him for the temporary and unjust spousal bonds he is famous for arranging in Shiraz (85). Sheikh Mahmoud, it should be noted, is the agent who married Gowhar to her murderer, Seif O-Qalam, who also killed the agent afterwards. Sheikh Mahmoud tends to rationalize his pursuits with religious sayings and verses, and asserts that women are meant for men's gratification. On the other hand, Seif O-Qalam believes he has a divine mission to cleanse society of "sick street women." Unlike either, however, Ahmad appears in the novel as the beacon of knowledge and communal engagement, who, despite and/or because of being traumatized by contemporary atrocities and unfortunate circumstances, has dispensed with fanatic religiosity altogether and developed a progressive caring personality. In fact, there is a reciprocal affection between Ahmad and Gowhar prior to her loss. Although it is not consummated in the actual world, the reunion between the two characters is accomplished on the ethereal level with Mashya and Mashyaneh as their prototypes in the concluding play. The Shirazi inflection in Mashya's and Mashyaneh's speech is also in Ahmad's and Gowhar's dialectical register, which supports this reading. As such, although he fails to start a life with Gowhar, Ahmad is able to transport his love for her and his rebellion against religiosity - which had bereaved him of his beloved - into the sphere of fiction and to the myth of the death of deity. Ahmad seems to be communicating - in the entire novel and particularly through the concluding play - that in spite of oppressive thought systems such as religion, and even faced with

uneducated people, extending affection and communal engagement are possible.¹⁰ Mashya and Mashyaneh negate authorities and ultimately unite.

Consequently, Ahmad, who was perpetually facing the anxiety of death, realized his project of writing about Gowhar – in a mythological and symbolic frame – and also utilized the concept of death as conducive to the characters' accomplishment of their goals. As Jahangir Dorri notes: "Even his gloomiest pessimism cannot cover up Chubak's anxiety for the burdens of human being, and his hope for the better future" (76; my translation). Ahmad, and through him Chubak, develops a generative approach to death, which despite the gloomy façade of the novel works toward empowering the individuals suffering from oppressive thought systems to realize their potential for pursuit of distinct life projects and demonstrating freedom of action.

IV. Some Conclusions and Contexts

This article is mainly a study of some thematic derivations and developments from Faulkner to Chubak, particularly death as a central theme in both *As I Lay Dying* and *The Patient Stone*. I have not argued for a relationship of influence between Sartre and Faulkner or Heidegger and Chubak. Rather, informed by the two philosophers' views of mortality, I hope to demonstrate that, despite the stylistic and intellectual influences that he took from the American modernist novelist, Chubak developed his existentialist inclinations in distinct ways. A study of *As I Lay Dying* shows that Faulkner treats death in a pro-Sartrean approach. According to Sartre, death is an imminent inevitability hovering over one's life. Moreover, he maintains that death, as a fact outside one's possibilities, annuls one's past achievements upon its arrival. In a similar way, Faulkner's novel features a fatalistic approach toward death; its major characters feel bound toward death, and thus tend to view life achievements as lost. As an example, the perspicacious Darl several times suggests humanity's incapacity in the face death as it wipes out one's past being and reduces it to nothingness. In addition, Addie found no restorative powers in life: she did not consider her schoolteaching

¹⁰ Some critics have ignored Ahmad's potential for rebellion and have thereby labeled the final play as "loose and irrelevant" and as damaging the aesthetics of the novel (Mirabedini "Writing from Amongst the People" 533; my translation). My existentialist reading of the piece, however, cannot endorse these reviews.

profession, marriage, or the births of her children able to redeem her existential condition. Her absurdist view is comparable to that of Meursault in *The Stranger*, as both had lost belief in a meaningful life, and were awaiting death. Whereas Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* offers a grim and absurdist worldview, *The Patient Stone*, despite its tricky façade, provides a positive portrayal of one's accomplishments in the face of death. Particularly, Ahmad's response to the prevalence of mortality was examined in the light of Heideggerian authenticity. For Heidegger, death anxiety not only suggests the imminence of one's demise, it should also promote authentic consciousness of one's distinct project in life. In a similar way, Ahmad is perpetually perplexed by fatal earthquakes and experiences the loss of other characters including his beloved, Gowhar, and makes it his mission to write the life story of the oppressed. His project is successful as he pens a few dramatic pieces, which appear in *The Patient Stone*. In the concluding play, Ahmad directs the destructive aspect of death to deities, which, granted the overall context of the novel, can suggest oppressive traditions of aristocratic romantic composition as well as religious fanaticism. Ahmad casts Gowhar's life and his love for her in the ethereal mold of the mythological story in which characters can conquer the injustice of the gods and gladly unite. Combining Ahmad's generative response to fatal earthquakes in the form of committed literary creativity and Chubak's distinct approach to death in his own writings, *The Patient Stone* demonstrates a pro-Heideggerian and positive portrayal of humanity's response toward the certainty of mortality.

Consequently, despite taking stylistic and intellectual influences from Faulkner, Chubak took his writing in new directions. In other words, while he was inspired by such a prominent modernist as Faulkner, Chubak has simultaneously localized and cultivated his novels in order to cater to the actual material circumstances surrounding him. In *The Patient Stone*, he uncovers the ugliness of life for the lower social strata; however, his aim is to draw attention to the oppressed, and accordingly bring about enlightenment and reform. We do not know much about his personal thoughts – as Chubak tended to avoid interviews and was not highly sociable, so says historian Ya'ghoub Azhand (86) – but his down-to-earth prose and usage of everyday language indicate his concern with his contemporary social circumstances and distinguish him from

Faulkner, who employs poetic and philosophical descriptions to depict Southern rural life impacted by the Great Depression.¹¹

More importantly, by endeavoring to write the story of the oppressed inhabitants in an underprivileged neighborhood in Shiraz, Chubak becomes a counterpart to his novel's protagonist, who carries out a similar project. In a sense, Ahmad is Chubak himself, striving, as a committed author, to enlighten and uplift his community, which struggles with ignorance and poverty under the tyranny of cultural and political institutions. Given the suppressive political situations in 1933, when the novel takes place, and 1966, when it was published, Chubak deemed it necessary to focus his literary efforts on the downtrodden sectors of his contemporary society. Reza Baraheni maintains that Chubak has portrayed the dark side of Iranians' life during the first decades of the fourteenth century (on the Jalali calendar equal to thirties to sixties on the Gregorian calendar) (741). In modern Iranian history, the 1930s were marked by economic difficulty and ruthless political dictatorship during the first Pahlavi, and in the 1960s, the second Pahlavi Shah, aided by an Anglo-American coup, established political authoritarianism at a time when economic class gap was on the rise (Nasr 105-106). In such a repressive context, Chubak recognizes his commitment to engage with the downtrodden populace and expose their unfortunate circumstances in an unjust and repressive status quo; thus, we can detect an enlightening, reformative, and energizing idea behind his apparently naturalistic style.

The scope of this study is limited; however, examining the texts discussed here, we can say that Chubak did not earn his status in modern Iranian fiction for simply *replicating* Western literary models, nor does he lose it with such allegations as moral degeneration or vulgarity.¹² Rather, while he looks to Western authors for aesthetic inspirations, Chubak, as the example of *The Patient Stone* demonstrates, develops a locally applicable socialist reconfiguration of elitist Modernism and philosophical Existentialism. It is thus important to study

¹¹ On Faulkner's poetic and spiraling use of language, see Olsen, "Raveling Out like a Looping String: *As I Lay Dying* and Regenerative Language."

¹² For the claim of vulgarity in Chubak's works, see Shahryar Zarshenas, "Sadeq Chubak va natooralism-e froydzade-ye lompani" ["Sadeq Chubak and Vulgar Freud-stricken Naturalism"].

the works of Chubak and his contemporaries not merely as sites of influence, but as loci for the transmission, transaction, and transformation of schemes. Studies such as this one seek to transcend conventional studies of influence and comparison for their own sake, and instead open discursive spaces for the examination of the evolution and development of, and the re-appropriation of so-called 'Western' literary modernity in, the Iranian literary landscape.¹³

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¹³ For a short pathology of comparative literary studies in Iran, see Khojastehpour and Mirzababazadeh Fomeshi, "The Present State of Comparative Literature in Iran: A Critical Study."

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