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The Narrator's Voice or the Mother's Mind? A Focalization-Based Reading of Sadeq Hedayat's "Abji Khanom"

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between narrative voice and the mother's consciousness in Sadeq Hedayat's short story "Abji Khanom." Previous readings have largely treated Abji as a passive, marginalized, and psychologically damaged woman, whereas the present study shifts attention to the narrative mechanism through which that image is produced. Drawing on Gérard Genette's concept of focalization and on selected psychoanalytic concepts from Freud and Jung, the article argues that the heterodiegetic narrator repeatedly aligns its evaluative language with the mother's perceptions and judgments. The narrator's apparently objective descriptions of Abji's appearance, religiosity, jealousy, and marital prospects frequently echo statements later spoken by the mother herself. This convergence suggests that the narrative does not operate as an entirely neutral omniscient discourse; rather, it is intermittently filtered through the mother's consciousness. The study further proposes that projection, displacement, the Jungian shadow, and revealing lapses or breaks in maternal self-censorship help explain the psychological force of this alignment. The mother's negative view of Abji can thus be read not merely as explicit hostility but as a transfer of anxieties, frustrations, and disavowed aspects of the self onto the daughter. The combined narratological and psychoanalytic reading reveals a multilayered structure in which gendered repression is reproduced not only through family relations but also through the very language by which Abji is represented.

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Introduction

"Abji Khanom" is one of Sadeq Hedayat's early short stories. It dates to September 1930 and is included in his first short-story collection, Zende be-gur [Buried Alive]. The story is deceptively simple in plot but complex in the organization of narrative perception. Hedayat presents a family in which two sisters, Abji Khanom and Mahrokh, are sharply contrasted. Abji is repeatedly described as unattractive, irritable, socially difficult, and increasingly absorbed in religious devotion, while Mahrokh is represented as attractive, sociable, cheerful, and marriageable. This contrast culminates in Mahrokh's wedding, on the night of which Abji commits suicide by throwing herself into the household cistern.

The present article begins from a narratological question: who, in fact, sees Abji in the way the narrative describes her? This question is distinct from the question of who speaks. As Genette's narratology makes clear, narrative voice and focalization are not identical. The narrator may remain grammatically outside the story while the information, perceptions, and value judgments conveyed by that narrator are restricted by or aligned with a character's consciousness. Accordingly, this study does not identify Hedayat himself with the narrator. Rather, it asks whether the third-person narrator repeatedly adopts the mother's evaluative perspective and thereby presents her judgments as if they were narratorial facts.

This distinction is crucial because the story initially appears to employ an omniscient third-person narrator. Traditional Persian discussions of point of view often describe it as the "window" through which the reader perceives fictional events (Dad, 1996: 157), while Horri (2006: 68–72) emphasizes the narratological distinction between point of view and focalization. The narrator has access to the interior states of Abji and, at several points, to those of her mother. Yet this access is not evenly distributed among all characters. Mahrokh and the father are generally presented from the outside, whereas the narrator repeatedly enters or approximates the consciousness of Abji and the mother. More importantly, many apparently neutral assessments of Abji are later repeated, almost verbatim in semantic terms, by the mother. The narrative therefore invites a closer examination of the boundary between narratorial discourse and character-bound evaluation.

The article combines narratology with psychoanalytic interpretation because the convergence between narrator and mother is not merely a formal phenomenon. The mother's repeated judgments about Abji—her ugliness, jealousy, religious behavior, lack of marital prospects, and supposed hypocrisy—can also be read as psychologically charged acts. Concepts such as projection, displacement, the Jungian shadow, and Freudian parapraxis provide a vocabulary for examining the possibility that the mother transfers onto Abji aspects of herself that she cannot acknowledge directly. The argument remains interpretive rather than diagnostic: the fictional mother is not treated as a clinical patient, and psychoanalytic concepts are used as heuristic tools for reading patterns within the text.

The central hypothesis, then, is that "Abji Khanom" contains a recurrent alignment between the mother's consciousness and the narrator's evaluative language. This alignment produces a subtle but powerful effect. The reader is encouraged to accept as objective truths judgments that may, in fact, be filtered through a hostile maternal perspective. By

bringing this mechanism to the foreground, the article seeks to show how narrative form itself participates in the representation of gendered repression.

Review of Literature

Psychological approaches to Hedayat's fiction have a long history. Critics have frequently emphasized the author's sustained interest in fear, repression, sexuality, death, self-destruction, fragmented identity, and dysfunctional family relations. Major studies in Persian include Homayoun Katouzian's (2022) Sadeq Hedayat va marg-e nevisandeh [Sadeq Hedayat and the Death of the Author], Mohammad Sanati's (2021) Tahlil-ha-ye ravanshenakhti dar honar va adabiyat [Psychological Analyses in Art and Literature], Sirous Shamisa's (2018) Dastan-e yek ruh [The Story of a Soul], Jalal Sattari's (1998) Baztab-e ostureh dar Buf-e kur [The Reflection of Myth in The Blind Owl], Ehsan Tabari's (1980) Masa'eli az farhang, honar va zaban [Issues in Culture, Art, and Language], and Hura Yavari's (2008) Ravankavi va adabiyat [Psychoanalysis and Literature].

More focused articles have examined specific psychological patterns in Hedayat's works. Norani and Mousavi Dehsheikh (2016) review major psychological criticisms of Hedayat and survey the interpretive traditions that have approached his fiction through psychoanalysis and depth psychology. Soleimani and Moqbeli (2019) analyze the Jungian shadow in The Blind Owl and identify both negative and potentially constructive dimensions of the archetype. Ebrahimi, Taslimi, and Afrashteh (2021) read The Blind Owl through individuation and Jungian archetypes, connecting the narrator's failed process of psychic integration with Nietzschean and Jungian models. Aali-Mohammadi, Shahvali Kuhshuri, and Malmoli (2023) similarly explore archetypal and aesthetic patterns in The Blind Owl, while Kariminia (2022) analyzes anxiety in Hedayat's "Suratak-ha" through Paul Tillich's philosophical psychology.

Research directly related to "Abji Khanom" is more limited but highly relevant. Taheri (2023) compares Abji with Miss Kilman in Virginia Woolf's Mrs Dalloway and argues that the two characters display significant typological similarities despite their different historical and cultural environments. The comparison highlights the importance of social exclusion, wounded selfhood, religious orientation, and gendered marginalization. Dastmalchi (2023), in a study of the "evil mother" archetype in Hedayat's fiction, examines a series of destructive maternal figures and identifies Abji's mother as an important example. That study emphasizes the recurring association between the destructive mother and tragic consequences such as psychic breakdown, suicide, and violence.

These studies establish the psychological richness of Hedayat's fiction and the centrality of maternal and familial relations. What has received less sustained attention, however, is the specific narratological problem addressed here: the extent to which the third-person narration of "Abji Khanom" is colored by the mother's consciousness. The novelty of the present study therefore lies not in claiming that Abji is psychologically oppressed—a point already recognized in scholarship—but in asking how the story's narrative discourse helps produce and naturalize that oppression.

Significance and Objectives

The study has three related objectives. First, it seeks to distinguish narrative voice

from focalization and to identify the pattern by which the third-person narrator repeatedly gains access to Abji's and the mother's interiority. Second, it examines the verbal correspondences between the narrator's descriptions and the mother's explicit speech in order to determine whether the narrator's apparently neutral judgments are, at crucial moments, aligned with maternal perception. Third, it uses psychoanalytic concepts as interpretive tools to explain why the mother might impose a negative image on her daughter and why this image becomes narratively persuasive.

The significance of this approach lies in its capacity to connect narrative technique with gendered power. If the mother's judgments are embedded within narratorial discourse, then Abji is not simply oppressed by what characters say to her. She is also oppressed at the level of representation: the language through which the reader initially knows her may already be contaminated by the same evaluative system that has shaped her self-image. This makes the story especially valuable for examining how family ideology can be reproduced through seemingly impersonal narration.

Research Problem

The problem can be stated more precisely as follows. "Abji Khanom" is narrated in the third person, and its narrator initially appears to possess broad knowledge. Yet the narrator's knowledge is selective. It enters the inner states of Abji and, more intermittently, the mother, while Mahrokh and the father are largely described from external behavior or through the reported judgments of others. At the same time, the narrator makes harsh evaluative claims about Abji—for example, that she is ugly, jealous, quarrelsome, and religious partly because she has been deprived of worldly happiness. Similar judgments later emerge directly from the mother's speech.

The question is therefore not whether the narrator "is" the mother. Nor is it necessary to claim that the narrator is unreliable in a conventional first-person sense. The more defensible proposition is that the narration repeatedly becomes character-bound: its focalization and evaluative vocabulary move close to the mother's perspective. This alignment creates a zone in which the distinction between narrator and character becomes porous. The article argues that this porosity is one of the story's most important formal strategies.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework has two complementary components. The first is narratological and draws primarily on Genette's distinction between voice and focalization. The second is psychoanalytic and uses concepts from Jungian and Freudian traditions to interpret the mother's relation to Abji. These frameworks are not treated as a single unified theory. Rather, narratology explains how evaluative perspective is distributed in the text, while psychoanalytic concepts help interpret the affective content of that perspective.

Narratological Foundations

Narratology studies the structures and procedures by which stories are told. One of its fundamental distinctions concerns the difference between the agent who speaks and the position from which narrative information is perceived. Traditional discussions of "point of view" often blur these two questions. Genette's concept of focalization was designed precisely to separate them: "who speaks?" is a

question of voice, whereas "who sees?" or, more broadly, "who perceives?" is a question of focalization (Genette, 1980: 186–190).

This distinction is especially useful for "Abji Khanom." The story has a heterodiegetic, third-person narrator, but third-person narration does not entail an entirely neutral or unlimited perspective. A narrator can speak from outside the story while restricting information to a character's perceptions or allowing the character's evaluative language to color narration. Genette distinguishes zero focalization, internal focalization, and external focalization. In the present story, the most productive description is variable internal focalization: the narrative moves between access to Abji's consciousness and alignment with the mother, while other characters remain comparatively opaque.

This process might metaphorically be described as the narrator "joining forces" with the mother; in narratological terms, however, the formulation can be made more precise. The phenomenon is better understood as narratorial alignment with a character-bound focal perspective. At several moments, the narrator's vocabulary resembles what free indirect discourse or psycho-narration can accomplish: a third-person narrative sentence carries evaluative features that seem to belong less to an impersonal narrator than to a character's consciousness. The argument of this article is that the mother is the principal source of that evaluative coloring.

Layered Voice and the Limits of "Polyphony"

Bakhtin's (1984) concept of polyphony is also relevant, but it requires caution. Strictly speaking, Bakhtinian polyphony refers to the coexistence of relatively autonomous consciousnesses, most famously in Dostoevsky, and should not be applied loosely to every text containing several voices. "Abji Khanom" is not polyphonic in that strong sense. Nevertheless, Bakhtin's emphasis on the interaction and contamination of voices helps describe the story's layered discourse. The narrator, the mother, and Abji do not remain perfectly sealed off from one another. Maternal language enters narratorial discourse, and narratorial formulations are later echoed in maternal speech.

For this reason, it is more precise to speak here of layered voicing or voice contamination than of full Bakhtinian polyphony. The story's complexity lies precisely in the fact that the reader may initially hear a narratorial judgment as authoritative and only later recognize that its vocabulary belongs to a character's ideological and emotional world.

Psychoanalytic Foundations

The psychoanalytic component of the analysis is motivated by the mother's intensely evaluative relation to Abji. The mother repeatedly defines her daughter through lack: lack of beauty, lack of marriageability, lack of social grace, and lack of sincere religious value. Such judgments can be approached through projection, the Jungian shadow, displacement, and revealing lapses in self-censorship. These terms must, however, be used with conceptual precision.

Projection is an unconscious defense mechanism in which feelings, impulses, or traits that are difficult to acknowledge in oneself are attributed to another person. Displacement refers to the redirection of affect from one object to another, safer or more available target. Jung's shadow designates disowned or unintegrated aspects of the personality, not simply "evil" traits. A Freudian slip, or parapraxis, is an involuntary error that may reveal a repressed intention or conflict. Not every harsh statement is therefore

a literal Freudian slip. In the analysis below, the mother's curses and accusations are treated more cautiously as moments in which self-censorship breaks down and hostility becomes unusually explicit.

The Shadow and Projection

Jung distinguishes between the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. The personal unconscious contains forgotten, repressed, or subliminal material from individual experience, whereas the collective unconscious refers to inherited structural patterns or archetypal forms (Jung, 1997: 14). Among the most influential Jungian concepts is the shadow, which designates aspects of the personality that the conscious ego does not wish to acknowledge. Jung describes the shadow as a hidden, repressed, and morally inferior personality, though he also emphasizes that the shadow is not wholly negative and may contain undeveloped positive qualities as well (Jung, 1991: 413; 1998: 258–262).

Projection is one of the principal processes through which shadow material can be encountered. Moreno explains projection as an automatic process by which unconscious content is experienced as though it belonged to an external object rather than to the subject (Moreno, 1997: 15). When a person repeatedly discovers in others precisely those tendencies that are difficult to recognize in the self, projection may be at work. In literary interpretation, this concept can help illuminate relations in which one character obsessively defines another through traits that carry a disproportionate emotional charge.

The present article therefore asks whether Abji can be read, at least partially, as a shadow figure for her mother: not in the sense that the two characters are psychologically identical, but in the sense that the daughter becomes a screen onto which maternal anxiety, frustration, resentment, and disavowed femininity are projected.

Displacement

Freud develops the concept of displacement most famously in relation to dream-work. In displacement, psychical intensity is transferred from one idea or object to another, often less threatening one. In The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud treats displacement as one of the major processes by which latent content is transformed in the manifest dream (Freud, 2003: 329). For the purposes of this article, the term is used analogically and with caution. The mother's hostility may be understood as displaced insofar as frustrations that cannot be expressed toward their original social or personal sources are redirected toward Abji, the more vulnerable member of the household.

This is not the same as projection. Projection attributes a disowned quality to another; displacement redirects emotional force toward another object. Both processes may coexist in the mother's relation to Abji, but they should not be conflated.

Freudian Slips and Revealing Speech

Freudian parapraxis refers to errors in speech, writing, memory, or action that may reveal unconscious conflict. Payandeh (2002: 5), drawing on psychoanalytic criticism, notes that such lapses have often been interpreted as moments in which conscious control temporarily weakens. Freud likewise treats slips as meaningful psychical acts rather than purely accidental mistakes (Freud, 2018: 44).

The mother's most violent statements in "Abji Khanom" are not all "slips" in the strict clinical sense: many are grammatically deliberate curses or accusations. It is therefore more accurate to read them as revealing eruptions of hostility or failures of self-

censorship. Their importance lies in the abruptness with which a socially acceptable maternal posture gives way to fantasies of disappearance, death, shame, or sexual suspicion.

Narratological Analysis: Focalization and Maternal Alignment

A first reading of "Abji Khanom" may suggest zero focalization or unrestricted omniscience because the narrator occasionally reports inner states. A closer reading, however, reveals that this access is uneven. The narrator repeatedly enters Abji's feelings and sometimes the mother's motivations, but provides almost no comparable interior access to Mahrokh or the father. This asymmetry is the first sign that the narrative is not governed by a uniformly omniscient and neutral perspective.

The second sign is lexical and evaluative. The narrator frequently describes Abji in terms that later appear in the mother's own speech. The most striking example occurs in the opening characterization.

«آبجی‌خانم بلندبالا، لاغر، گندمگون، لب‌های کلفت، موهای مشکی داشت و روی هم رفته زشت بود.»

"Abji Khanom was tall and thin, with a wheat-colored complexion, thick lips, and black hair; taken as a whole, she was ugly."
(Hedayat, 1963: 73)

The adjective "ugly" is not a neutral physical description. It is an evaluative conclusion. The narrative voice seems to authorize that conclusion as fact, yet the mother later uses precisely the same evaluative framework. This correspondence raises the possibility that the opening description is not simply omniscient judgment but narration already colored by the mother's habitual way of seeing her daughter.

The narrator's knowledge is also marked by expressions such as "apparently" and by access to concealed feeling. Concerning the mother, the narrator observes that she beat and tormented Abji from childhood but "apparently" displayed concern for her in front of neighbors. The word "apparently" implies access to a discrepancy between external behavior and internal motive. Soon afterward, the narrator reports that Abji "in the bottom of her heart" loved Kolb-Hossein and wanted to marry him. The narrator therefore enters both mother and daughter, yet remains external to Mahrokh and the father. This selective interiority supports the description of the story as variably internally focalized rather than uniformly omniscient.

«از همان بچگی آبجی‌خانم را مادرش می‌زد و به او می‌پیچید، ولی ظاهراً روبه‌روی مردم، روبه‌روی همسایه‌ها برای او غصه‌خوری می‌کرد.»

"From childhood her mother beat and tormented Abji Khanom, although in front of other people—before the neighbors—she apparently acted as though she worried about her."
(Hedayat, 1963: 73)

«...ظاهراً از این حرف‌ها می‌زد، ولی پیدا بود که در ته دل کلب‌حسین را دوست داشت و خیلی مایل بود که شوهر بکند.»

"She apparently said such things, but it was clear that deep down she liked Kolb-Hossein and very much wanted to marry."
(Hedayat, 1963: 74)

The mother's own speech then makes the evaluative convergence difficult to ignore. She repeatedly presents Abji's ugliness and lack of marriageability as objective realities:

«این بدبختی را چه بکنم هان؟ دختر به این زشتی را کی می‌گیرد؟ می‌ترسم آخر بیخ گیسم بماند! یک دختری که نه مال دارد، نه جمال دارد و نه کمال، کدام بیچاره است که او را بگیرد؟»

"What am I supposed to do with this misfortune, then? Who will marry a girl this ugly? I'm afraid she'll be left hanging on to me forever! A girl with neither money, nor beauty, nor accomplishments—which poor wretch would marry her?"

(Hedayat, 1963: 74)

The narrator later states that Abji had given up the idea of marriage partly because no husband had been found for her and because Kolb-Hossein had rejected her. The mother repeats the same proposition: "I tried to give you to Kolb-Hossein, but they did not like you." What appears first as narratorial information is thus reproduced as maternal discourse. The same pattern occurs with the concept of jealousy.

«آبجی‌خانم بیست‌ودو سالش بود، ولی در خانه مانده بود و در باطن با خواهرش حسادت می‌ورزید.»

"Abji Khanom was twenty-two years old, but she had remained unmarried at home and inwardly felt jealous of her sister."

(Hedayat, 1963: 76)

«پس خواهری برای چه روزی خوب است هان؟ می‌دانم از حسودی است، حسود هرگز به مقصود نمی‌رسد.»

"Then what is a sister good for, eh? I know it is because of jealousy. A jealous person never reaches her desire."

(Hedayat, 1963: 78)

Again, the narrator first presents jealousy as an interior fact and the mother later voices the same diagnosis. This does not prove that every narratorial statement is simply the mother's thought, but the pattern is too systematic to be dismissed as coincidence. The narrator's evaluative language repeatedly anticipates or echoes maternal judgments.

The same convergence structures the representation of religion. The narrator explains Abji's piety as compensation for deprivation: because she considers herself excluded from the pleasures of this world, she tries to secure the next world through prayer and devotion. The mother expresses the same suspicion in harsher colloquial language, accusing Abji of ostentatious piety.

«از آنجایی‌که از خوشی‌های این دنیا خودش را بی‌بهره می‌دانست، می‌خواست به‌زور نماز و طاعت اقلاً مال دنیای دیگر را دریابد.»

"Because she considered herself deprived of the pleasures of this world, she wanted, by sheer force of prayer and devotion, at least to obtain a share of the next world."

(Hedayat, 1963: 74)

«از صبح تا شام برایم جانماز آب می‌کشد.»

"From morning to night she puts on a show of piety for me."

(Hedayat, 1963: 78)

The Persian idiom janamaz ab keshidan literally refers to wetting the prayer mat and conventionally signifies hypocritical or ostentatious piety. The mother's formulation is therefore far more openly condemnatory than the narrator's, but both organize Abji's religiosity around the same suspicious causal logic. The narrative repeatedly mentions her attendance at sermons, mourning ceremonies, and religious gatherings; the mother interprets those practices as pretense. When the narrator later says that, amid the wedding commotion, Abji must "probably" have gone to a sermon,

the adverb functions as an inferential cue rather than an omniscient fact. It sounds less like unlimited knowledge than like a habitual expectation—precisely the sort of expectation the mother would have formed about Abji.

«ولی در میان این هیاهو حرفی از آبجی‌خانم نبود، از دو بعدازظهر او رفته بود بیرون، کسی نمی‌دانست کجاست، لابد او رفته بود پای وعظ.»

"Yet amid all this commotion there was no word of Abji Khanom. She had gone out at two in the afternoon and no one knew where she was; she had probably gone to a sermon."

(Hedayat, 1963: 81)

The force of "probably" (labod) is important. It exposes an inference within narration. Rather than demonstrating that the narrator actually knows where Abji is, the sentence reproduces the family's habitual interpretive schema: when Abji disappears, she is assumed to be at a religious gathering. The mother's later speech strengthens this connection. When Abji returns, the mother interrogates her in rapid succession and ends with a revealing sentence: "Everyone kept asking where her sister was; I did not know what to answer."

«چرا شام نمی‌خوری؟ چرا گوشت‌تلخی می‌کنی؟ چرا اینجا نشسته‌ای؟ چادر سیاهت را باز کن، چرا بدشگونی می‌کنی؟ بیا روی خواهرت را ببوس، بیا از پشت شیشه تماشا بکن عروس و داماد مثل قرص ماه را، مگر تو حسرت نداری؟ بیا آخر تو یک چیزی بگو، آخر همه می‌پرسیدند خواهرش کجاست؟ من نمی‌دانستم چه جواب بدهم.»

"Why don't you eat dinner? Why are you sulking? Why are you sitting here? Take off that black chador—why are you bringing bad luck? Come kiss your sister. Come watch the bride and groom through the glass—they look like the full moon. Don't you feel any longing? Come on, say something. Everyone kept asking where her sister was, and I didn't know what to answer."

(Hedayat, 1963: 82)

This speech makes explicit that the mother has been preoccupied with Abji's absence and with how that absence appears to others. The narrator's earlier inference about Abji's whereabouts can thus be retrospectively understood as belonging to the same field of maternal expectation. The story repeatedly produces this retrospective effect: a statement first encountered as narratorial description is later revealed to resemble the mother's own vocabulary, values, or anxieties.

The result is a form of ideological focalization. The narrator remains grammatically separate from the mother, yet the narrative's value-laden descriptions often seem to pass through her evaluative filter. Such a structure can naturalize social judgments because readers encounter them before they are explicitly marked as the speech of a prejudiced character. Abji is first "given" to us as ugly, quarrelsome, jealous, and compensatorily religious; only later do we recognize that these are the very categories through which her mother has long interpreted her.

Psychoanalytic Analysis of the Mother–Daughter Relationship

The narratological pattern becomes more revealing when placed beside the mother-daughter relationship. The mother's hostility is explicit, but the text also invites a reading in which Abji functions as a psychologically charged double or shadow object. The argument must remain cautious: the story does not provide enough information to reconstruct

the mother's biography, and no clinical diagnosis is possible. Nevertheless, several recurrent motifs support the interpretation that the mother treats Abji as a screen for disavowed affect.

First, the mother's judgments possess an intensity disproportionate to the behaviors they condemn. Abji's appearance, religious observance, jealousy, and failure to marry are not simply mentioned; they become the mother's central vocabulary for defining her daughter's worth. Second, some of the qualities criticized in Abji may also belong, in different form, to the mother's own world. The mother herself uses religious language, refers to divine will, owns an expensive prayer rug, and participates in a household culture deeply marked by religious ritual. The text does not prove that she is as religious as Abji, and this inference should not be overstated. Yet the narrative permits the possibility that the mother recognizes in the daughter a form of religiosity whose intensity or social meaning makes her uncomfortable.

The prayer-bead passage is suggestive. The narrator notes that Abji carries a long black rosary whose color has faded from being repeatedly handled. The Persian verb is plural, implying that the beads may have passed through more hands than Abji's alone. This detail cannot establish the mother's piety as fact, but in conjunction with the mother's valuable termeh prayer mat and her repeated references to God's will, it makes a simple opposition between "religious Abji" and "nonreligious mother" difficult to sustain. The mother may be rejecting in Abji an exaggerated or socially embarrassing form of a symbolic world to which she herself also belongs.

«وقتی ماه محرم و صفر می‌آمد هنگام جولان و خودنمایی آبجی‌خانم می‌رسید.»

"When the months of Muharram and Safar arrived, it was time for Abji Khanom to come into her own and put herself on display."

(Hedayat, 1963: 74)

«باقی روز را هم پس از رسیدگی جزئی به کارهای خانه و ایراد گرفتن به این و آن یک تسبیح دراز که رنگ سیاهش از بس‌که گردانیده بودند زرد شده بود...»

"For the rest of the day, after doing a little housework and finding fault with this person and that, she handled a long rosary whose black color had turned yellow from so much use..."

(Hedayat, 1963: 75)

«حتی جانماز ترمه‌ای که آبجی‌خانم چندبار از مادر خواسته بود و به او نداده بود، برای ماهرخ گذاشت.»

"She even set aside for Mahrokh the termeh prayer mat that Abji Khanom had asked her for several times and that she had refused to give her."

(Hedayat, 1963: 78)

Inner Dissatisfaction and the Mirror

A second motif concerns self-image and internal dissatisfaction. When Abji learns of Mahrokh's marriage arrangements, she becomes overwhelmed, leaves under the pretext of prayer, and looks at herself in a small mirror. The mirror can be read as a symbol of self-awareness and identity crisis, an interpretation strengthened by connecting the scene to the narrative's repeated acts of evaluation. Abji does not encounter her image in a social vacuum. She has been told since childhood that she is ugly and unmarriageable. The mirror therefore reflects not only a body but an internalized judgment.

In this sense, the image Abji sees may be understood as partly constructed through the

mother's gaze. She searches for herself through a visual field already saturated with comparison to Mahrokh. The scene does not require us to claim that the mirror itself is a "defense mechanism." More precisely, the mirror externalizes the process by which Abji confronts an identity shaped by repeated social and familial judgments. Her self-scrutiny is thus psychologically connected to the maternal discourse that the narrator has helped naturalize.

«آبجی‌خانم خون خونش را می‌خورد؛ همین‌که مطلب را دانست، دیگر نتوانست باقی بله‌بری‌ها را گوش بدهد، به‌بهانهٔ نماز بی‌اختیار بلند شد، رفت پایین، در اتاق پنج‌دری خودش را در آینهٔ کوچکی که داشت نگاه کرد.»

"Abji Khanom was boiling inside. As soon as she understood what was happening, she could no longer listen to the rest of the marriage negotiations. On the pretext of prayer, she involuntarily got up, went downstairs, and in the five-door room looked at herself in the small mirror she owned."

(Hedayat, 1963: 77)

Jealousy and the Production of Rivalry

Jealousy provides a third point of convergence between maternal speech and narratorial judgment. The narrator states as interior fact that Abji "inwardly felt jealous" of Mahrokh. The mother then repeats the accusation with complete certainty. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this accusation may do more than describe Abji. It may help organize a family system in which the older daughter is assigned the role of the resentful, failed woman and the younger daughter the role of the attractive, successful one.

The mother's repeated comparison of the sisters can itself produce the jealousy that she later condemns. In that sense, the story illustrates a self-confirming structure of family discourse: Abji is treated as inferior, becomes wounded and resentful, and is then blamed for the resentment that the hierarchy has helped create. The narrative's alignment with the mother risks reproducing the same structure by presenting jealousy first as an objective interior fact rather than as an affect generated within a relational system.

Religiosity and the Charge of Hypocrisy

The accusation of hypocrisy operates similarly. The narrator sometimes interprets Abji's devotion as compensation for exclusion from worldly pleasure, while the mother openly calls her piety fraudulent. A psychoanalytic reading should resist the temptation to decide whether Abji is "really" sincere. What matters is that her religious life becomes another surface onto which the family projects moral judgments. The mother's language transforms devotion into evidence of deceit, jealousy, and social failure.

One possible interpretation is that the mother may herself have sought refuge in religious practice and may therefore project discomfort with that aspect of her own world onto Abji. The text does not provide direct evidence for such a personal history, so this possibility should remain tentative rather than be treated as fact. What can be established is that the mother inhabits the same religious culture while condemning Abji's participation in it, and that this contradiction makes projection a plausible interpretive model.

Projection

Taken together, four recurring descriptions are especially important: Abji is "ugly"; she has been quarrelsome since childhood; no one will marry her; and her religious behavior is ostentatious. Each judgment is either spoken

directly by the mother or closely echoed by the narrator. This pattern allows us to read the mother's negative representation of Abji as a possible act of projection. The daughter becomes the most available "mirror" onto which anxiety about femininity, social worth, marriage, aging, sexuality, and respectability can be placed.

Projection, however, should not be treated as a total explanation. Abji is a separate fictional subject whose suffering cannot be reduced to the mother's psyche. The value of the concept lies in showing how the mother may transform internal conflict into external judgment, and how the narrator's alignment with that judgment gives it the appearance of objective reality.

Displacement

Displacement helps clarify another dimension of the relationship. The mother lives within a social order in which a daughter's marriageability affects family honor and maternal responsibility. Frustrations generated by poverty, patriarchal expectations, limited female agency, and fear of public judgment cannot easily be directed toward the social system itself. Abji, however, is present and vulnerable. The mother can therefore redirect anxiety and anger toward the daughter whose body and social position symbolize the family's perceived failure.

This use of displacement is more defensible than treating every negative trait attributed to Abji as "displacement." When the mother calls Abji ugly or jealous, projection may be at issue. When social or personal frustration is redirected onto Abji as a target, displacement becomes the more appropriate term. The two processes may overlap, but their distinction strengthens the psychoanalytic argument.

Revealing Speech and Breakdowns of Self-Censorship

The mother's most violent speech occurs during the final conflict. She curses Abji and says, among other things, "May you become mute," "May the corpse-washer take that body of yours," and "May I be left mourning you." She then adds that with Abji's appearance no one will marry her. The passage is striking because the language of maternal concern gives way to a fantasy of disappearance and death.

«الهی لال بشوی، مرده‌شور ترکیبت را ببرد، داغت به دلم بماند، دخترهٔ بی‌شرم، برو گم بشو، می‌خواهی لک روی دخترم بگذاری؟ ... تو بمیری که با این ریخت و هیکل کسی تو را نمی‌گیرد.»

"May you become mute; may the corpse-washer take that body of yours; may I be left mourning you, you shameless girl. Get lost! Do you want to bring disgrace on my daughter? ... I swear on your death, with that face and body no one will marry you."

(Hedayat, 1963: 79)

Calling this passage a literal Freudian slip would be too strong: the mother is not accidentally substituting one word for another. Yet the scene does resemble a breakdown of self-censorship. Hostility that elsewhere appears in the socially acceptable language of worry about marriage suddenly becomes explicit aggression. The curse "may I be left mourning you" is especially chilling because Abji will soon die. The value of psychoanalytic interpretation here lies not in claiming prophetic unconscious intent but in recognizing how the mother's language momentarily exposes the violence underlying her ostensibly protective concern.

A second passage similarly reveals the fusion of moral anxiety and contempt. The

mother says that it is fortunate Abji is not beautiful because otherwise, given how often she leaves the house "on the pretext of sermons," people would talk about her. The statement simultaneously insults Abji's appearance, questions her religious motives, and introduces sexual suspicion.

«خدا رحم کرده که تو خوشگل نیستی وگرنه دم ساعت که به بهانهٔ وعظ از خانه به بیرون می‌روی، بیشتر می‌شود بالای تو حرف درآورد.»

"Thank God you are not beautiful; otherwise, since you are forever leaving the house on the pretext of going to sermons, people would have even more to say about you."

(Hedayat, 1963: 79)

Again, the line need not be classified as a textbook parapraxis. It is more persuasively read as a revealing utterance in which the mother's suppressed moral suspicion becomes explicit. The point is consistent with the article's broader argument: the mother carries a dense burden of shame, social anxiety, and hostility, and the narrative repeatedly converts that burden into the language through which Abji is known.

Conclusion

The narratology of "Abji Khanom" is more complex than an initial label of "omniscient third-person narration" suggests. The narrator does not distribute interior access evenly across the fictional world. Instead, the narrative moves most closely around Abji and her mother, and its evaluative language repeatedly converges with maternal speech. The story is therefore best described as heterodiegetic narration with variable internal focalization and recurrent narratorial alignment with the mother.

This distinction changes how several apparently factual statements should be read. Descriptions of Abji as ugly, jealous, quarrelsome, religiously compensatory, and unlikely to marry do not necessarily belong to an impersonal narrative authority. Their semantic correspondence with the mother's direct speech suggests that at least some are filtered through a maternal horizon of judgment. The mother's voice enters narration without always being marked as quoted speech, producing a layered discourse in which character ideology can masquerade as narratorial fact.

The psychoanalytic reading deepens this formal analysis. Abji can plausibly be read as a shadow-bearing figure for the mother: a daughter onto whom socially charged anxieties about femininity, marriageability, beauty, sexuality, religiosity, and respectability are projected. The text does not justify a clinical diagnosis or a claim that every judgment is projection. Yet the intensity and repetition of the mother's evaluations, combined with the narrator's echoing of them, make projection a productive interpretive concept. Displacement further explains how wider frustrations may be redirected toward the daughter, while the mother's curses and accusations reveal moments in which hostility exceeds the socially acceptable language of maternal concern.

The article's central contribution is therefore to show that gendered repression in "Abji Khanom" operates on two interconnected levels. At the level of family relations, Abji is demeaned, compared unfavorably with Mahrokh, and made to experience herself as unattractive and unmarriageable. At the level of narrative form, the reader is initially invited to perceive her through language that often reproduces the

mother's judgments. The oppression is thus not only represented by the story; it is partially embedded in the mechanism of representation itself.

This reading also helps explain the tragic force of Abji's suicide. The event is not simply the consequence of individual jealousy or disappointed marriage. It emerges from a long process in which social values become family judgments, family judgments become internalized self-perception, and those judgments are reinforced by the narrative language through which the character is introduced to the reader. Hedayat's formal achievement lies in allowing this process to remain partially concealed. Only by separating voice from focalization and by tracing the recurrence of maternal vocabulary can the reader perceive how deeply the mother's consciousness has entered the story's representational structure.

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