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A study on Naturalism in the Short Story *A Man in the Cage* by Iranian Writer Sadegh Choobak

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Abstract

Naturalism was a literary movement taking place from the 1880s to 1940s that used detailed realism to suggest that social conditions, heredity, and environment had inescapable force in shaping human character. It was depicted as a literary movement that seeks to replicate a believable everyday reality. Whereas realism seeks only to describe subjects as they really are, naturalism also attempts to determine "scientifically" the underlying forces influencing the actions of its subjects. Naturalistic works often include sordid subject matter, frankness about sexuality along with a pervasive pessimism. Naturalistic works exposed the dark harshness of life, including poverty, racism, violence, prejudice, disease, corruption, prostitution, and filth. This study focused on the Sadegh Choobak's Short Story A Man in the Cage from the viewpoint of literary naturalism. In this regard, the story's naturalistic features represented and discussed.

Keywords: *Animals, Deformity, Dog as mistress, Loneliness, Naturalism, Sordid life, Sexual repression*

1 Introduction

The term naturalism describes a type of literature that attempts to apply scientific principles of objectivity and detachment to its study of human beings [4]. Unlike realism, which focuses on literary technique, naturalism implies a philosophical position: for naturalistic writers, since human beings are, in Emile Zola's phrase, "human beasts," characters can be studied through their relationships to their surroundings. Zola's 1880 description of this method in *Le roman experimental* (*The Experimental Novel*, 1880) follows Claude Bernard's medical model and the

historian Hippolyte Taine's observation that "virtue and vice are products like vitriol and sugar"--that is, that human beings as "products" should be studied impartially, without moralizing about their natures[8].

As opposed to such movements as Romanticism or Surrealism, in which subjects may receive highly symbolic, idealistic, or even supernatural treatment. Naturalism is the outgrowth of literary realism, a prominent literary movement in mid-19th-century France and elsewhere. Naturalistic writers were influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution [7]. They believed that one's heredity and social environment largely determine one's character.

Through this objective study of human beings, naturalistic writers believed that the laws behind the forces that govern human lives might be studied and understood. Naturalistic writers thus used a version of the scientific method to write their novels; they studied human beings governed by their instincts and passions as well as the ways in which the characters' lives were governed by forces of heredity and environment. Although they used the techniques of accumulating detail pioneered by the realists, the naturalists thus had a specific object in mind when they chose the segment of reality that they wished to convey [3].

In George Becker's famous and contested phrase, naturalism's philosophical framework can be simply described as "pessimistic materialistic determinism"[7]. A modified definition appears in Donald Pizer's *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction,* Revised Edition (1984);

[T]he naturalistic novel usually contains two tensions or contradictions, the two constitute the theme and form of the naturalistic novel. The first tension is that between the subject matter. The naturalist populates his work primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. His fictional world is that of the commonplace and unheroic in which life would seem to be chiefly the dull round of daily existence, as we ourselves usually conceive of our lives. A naturalistic work is thus an extension of realism only in the sense that both modes often deal with the local and contemporary. The naturalist, however, discovers in this material the extraordinary and excessive in human nature.

The second tension involves the theme of the naturalistic novel. The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance. But he also suggests a compensating humanistic value in his characters or their fates which affirms the significance of the individual and of his life. The tension here is that between the naturalist's desire to represent in fiction the new, discomfiting truths which he has found in the ideas and life of his late nineteenth-century world, and also his desire to find some meaning in experience which reasserts the validity of the human enterprise. [7]

Some examples of naturalistic literary works include Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat*, which pits a crew of shipwrecked survivors in a raft against starvation, dehydration, and sharks in the middle of the ocean, and Jack London's *To Build a*

Fire, which reveals the inability of a Californian transplant to survive outside of his "natural" environment as he freezes to death in the Alaskan wilderness.

2 Statement of the Problem

This study attempts to offer a naturalistic reading of Sadegh Choobak's short story *A Man in the Cage*. In this work, he explores one major theme that is the way human environmental, conditions affect on his life in a disgusting manner. Environment control the destitute person and determine him to be a puppet in its hand. In such a way, supernatural value become pale and wither, instead a sense of helplessness, hopelessness and prostration culminate. Choosing this subject matter, Choobak masterfully represent a deformed person, living with animals in a house which separate him from the other persons contact, except for his sister, though they are emotionally detached. In this regard, he describes the condition of his life in details by using images that intensify the effect of his frustration, vast and intentional solitude, taking refuge in drugs, emotional connection with animals, and so forth. Though, the nature at its last blow even does not pity toward him to reserve his emotional dependence of him toward his female dog when he discovers that even his female dog separates him in order to mate with a male dog. Choobak successfully creates a naturalistic story by using naturalistic theme, naturalistic elements in its characterization and images. He also uses plot elements like surprise ending and dilemma to represent such naturalistic effects on the readers.

3 Research Questions

- Is A Man in the Cage a naturalistic short story?
- What are the naturalistic elements of this short story?

4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study springs mainly from the fact that Choobak's works, with their critical and challenging view toward the materialistic problems and conflicts of the human beings tries to present that mostly material problems block the human being's way to achieve to the supernatural and metaphysical aspects of life. Such material dimensions can be viewed in the form of class struggle that put the lower classes of the society under pressure, heredity that endows them not a pleasant bodily stature and environment that cause them to bear its harsh consequences in the form of being from a low birth, dealing with social shortcomings, confronting with bad fortune, forcing to repress their sexual desires, or living as a quean, tolerating starvation, vagrancy, fear and so on [9]. Analyzing

A Man in the Cage, gives the readers a time to consider the keys to understanding the importance of the naturalistic elements of this work and finding it in the Choobak's other literary works.

5 About Sadegh Choobak

Sadegh Choobak, an Iranian author, was born in Boushehr in (1916). His father was a merchant, but he did not follow his father's career and became an author. He studied in Boushehr and Shyiraz and continued his studies in the American college of Tehran. Then he was employed in the Minestry of Culture in (1937). He permeated his first story collection *Punch and Judy* in [1945]. In this work, and *Why Was the Sea Stormy?* (1949), he described landscapes, while the characters, their relationships and their spirits were also depicted. His first published work which was a collection of three story and a play, was entitled *A Man-Ape Whose Sahib Was Died*. His other works that brought him great fame were respectively *Tangsir* that was translated to 18 foreign languages and *Confident* in which the stream of consciousness technique was used to show different accounts of different people about the same story, a mode of expression that was quite recent in Iran's literature [6]. When *Confident* was prompted, it aroused debates from different literary circles. Other stories written by him are *Last Light* (a collection of 8 short stories) and *First Day in the Grave* (a collection of 10 short stories). He was fluent in English and had a hand in translation. He translated the famous story of *Pinocchio* to Persian under the name of *The Wooden Dummy* and also translated *The Raven* written by Edgar Allen Poe into Persian. His last translation was Indian Romantic Tales that he entitled *Mahyare* into Persian in (1991). Choobak's works has been seriously reviewed and they has been analyzed in several books including the "*Story Writing"* written by Reza Baraheni, *"Iranian Fuglemen Writers" by Mohammad Ali Spanlv*, "*A Hundred Years of Iranian Fiction*" by Hassan Abedini, and "*Pioneer Story Writers of the Current story writing of Iran*" by Ali Akbar Kasmaei. In the year (1994), he went to England and America. He lost his eye sight in (1998) and died in America, Berkeley in the same year. His corpse was burnt based on his request in his will [1].

6 Significance of Choobak's works

Along with Mohammad Ali Jamalzade (1895-1997) and Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951), Choobak was one of the forerunners of the Iranian short story writers. In Choobak's works, each character has his/her own language that is consistent to his/her own culture, family and age. He also meticulously describes the realities of life and this is one of the most important characteristic of his works, in fact, for

this scrutiny in paying attention to the details, he was called an extreme realist or a naturalist.

7 Summary of *A Man in the Cage*

A Man in the Cage deals with the story of Sayyed Hassan Khan who could not sleep at night doubting if he is alive or dead. He hated being alive. He is now more than 50 years old. From the story, reader is informed that he was born in Lahoor, missing his leg there, that is not mentioned why, and after only 3 month of marriage he missed his teenage wife whose name was Sodabeh. Now he was living with a dog and his sister that is nothing more than a valet in his life and helps him in the case of preparing his needful. In fact he intentionally imprisoned himself in their paternal inheritance house. Opening his eyes, he thought that light is nothing more than an intruder. He freighted to see the walls and the door of his room. Every thing in his house was old and worn-out. His only relief was a female-dog and using opium. After Sudabeh's death, he felt totally alone. Nothing entertained him except looking at a cutting-pen composed of twelve sharp blades that he once stole from one of his friends and hides it under his sleeping pad. He sometimes brought it out and cleaned the blades one by one. While cleaning, he mostly thought to get rid of it because of the fear that he felt in keeping it.

Neighbors used to think that he was passing his time worshiping God and saying prayers. Widows regretted his fidelity. But in reality, he hated such religious ideas. He remembered that it was less than 7 days after his wife's death that he released his canaries which he loved so much from their cage. He described their empty cage as hanged corpses.

After awhile, he found a small puppy in the waterway of the garden which was from Irish race. He named it Rasoo and he strongly believed that he it was wiser than canaries for canaries ate seed and rotated around themselves, ingratitudely washed their feathers in their water and consequently upset him. In the contrary, Rasoo's gestures were meaningful since it felt unhappiness and sadness. It did not have human's grimace. He described the picture of a woman, named Gol Andam, taking a big cow on her shoulders behind her was standing a hunter with his gun, a rabbit and a lion. This picture reminded him of the questions his wife was used to ask him childishly when they were eating breakfast.

He then looked at the clock that for 14 years stood still on 4:03. The he touched Rasoo's wet nose and was getting sexually satisfied, meanwhile he imagined Sudabeh's slim body. After this, he described in details how he was going to toilet with the help of his stick, his excretion and that his excretion that is so malodorous and disgusting is a rat's food which was living in the cesspool for a long time.

After this, he explained that how he and his dog were addicted to opium. His sister was jealous of the dog's position that without any effort could eat the best part of the meat and sleep in the best part of the house and was adorned by Seyed

Hassan Khan. But suddenly everything changed drastically. The dog got restless at nights for 3 nights and tended to open the door and look helplessly at him.
Although, Seyed Hassan Khan thought that it was his best companion and a portrait of a timid and faithful mistress, he recognized that it is the dog's mating season. The sound of male-dogs on the street behind the door excited the dog and irritated him. He tried to prohibit Rasoo from going out but when he found out that he could not do that, he opened the door and let one of the male-dogs came in. He felt a severe pain in his heart. In a rainy weather, the two dogs were mating before his eyes.

8 Methodology

Naturalism is an extension of realism, and may be better understood by study of the basic precepts of that literary movement. It is a literary movement seeking to depict life as accurately as possible, without artificial distortions of emotion, idealism, and literary convention. The school of thought is a product of post-Darwinian biology in the nineteenth century. It asserts that human beings exist entirely in the order of nature. Human beings do not have souls or any mode of participating in a religious or spiritual world beyond the biological realm of nature, and any such attempts to engage in a religious or spiritual world are acts of self-delusion and wish-fulfillment [10]. Humanity is thus a higher order animal whose character and behavior are, as M. H. Abrams summarizes, entirely determined by two kinds of forces, hereditary and environment. The individual's compulsive instincts toward sexuality, hunger, and accumulation of goods are inherited via genetic compulsion and the social and economic forces surrounding his or her upbringing.
Naturalistic writers--including Zola, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser--try to present their subjects with scientific objectivity. They often choose characters based on strong animal drives who are "victims both of glandular secretions within and of sociological pressures without" [2]. The end of the naturalistic literary works is usually unpleasant or unhappy, perhaps even "tragic," though not in the cathartic sense Aristotle, Sophocles, or Elizabethan writers would have understood by the term tragedy. Naturalists emphasize the smallness of humanity in the universe; they remind readers of the immensity, power, and cruelty of the natural world, which does not care whether humanity lives or dies [5].
There are defining characteristics of literary naturalism. One of these is pessimism. Very often, one or more characters will continue to repeat one line or phrase that tends to have a pessimistic connotation, sometimes emphasizing the inevitability of death.
Another characteristic of literary naturalism is detachment from the story. The author often tries to maintain a tone that will be experienced as objective. This puts the focus on the plot and what happens to the character, rather than the

characters themselves. Another characteristic of naturalism is determinism. Determinism is basically the opposite of the notion of free will. For determinism, the idea that individual characters have a direct influence on the course of their lives is supplanted by a focus on nature or fate. Still another common characteristic is a surprising twist at the end of the story. Equally, there tends to be in naturalist novels and stories a strong sense that nature is indifferent to human struggle. These are only a few of the defining characteristics of naturalism, however.

- Characters: Frequently but not invariably ill-educated or lower-class characters whose lives are governed by the forces of heredity, instinct, and passion. Their attempts at exercising free will or choice are hamstrung by forces beyond their control.

- Setting: Frequently is an urban setting, dirty and unpleasant. It reflects the characters mental and emotional life.
- Plots: Walcutt says that the naturalistic novel offers "clinical, panoramic, slice-of-life" drama that is often a "chronicle of despair" [5]. The novel of degeneration.
- Subject matter: Walcutt identifies survival, determinism, violence, and taboo as key [5].

Mentioning the main characteristics of naturalism and a general background, this study tries to prove that A Man in the Cage is a naturalistic short story by focusing on its characterization, language, plot, setting, and subject matter in the next section.

9 Discussion and Results

As a naturalist writer, Choobak accurately report what can be observed and acquired through the senses in describing the main character. He objectively represents his character's problems and short-comings through using pictorial, visual, smelling, kinetic and tactile images. Seyed Hassan is not able to communicate with human beings and therefore takes refugee in his relationships to animals, i.e. canaries or his dog, a rat. But it seems in the end of the story that his refugee is determined to be ruined. It was determined that he lost his leg in his youth and has lived a life as a deformed man. Going along with this problem, he found a hope in being a married man to have a companion but it was doomed for him to miss her, only after 3 months of their marriage. Without moralizing his nature, he can be analyzed through his relationship with his surrounding. He imprisons himself in his house in which everything is worn out and dirty. He uses opium regularly. His entertainment for a long time is looking at and polishing a jackknife which he stole once and hide it, an action that made him horrified and anxious. He even has not changed the battery of the clock. In fact, time stops for

him in the symbolic form of this clock whose legs stop progressing. He even does not have inclination to kill a rat that inhabited in the cesspool of his house for a long time. As a matter of fact, though the rat is the symbol of dirtiness, disease and corruption, he tries to get along with. Moreover, he casts the image of a mistress on a female-dog which left him behind in the end of the story in order to mate with the one from its own species.

The other element that helps creating naturalistic overview is the short story's language. The selected language is a coarse, plain and bare one, without any decorative ornament. The slang language in which adjectives are used excessively is used to describe the dark and shabby dimensions of his situation. His words indicate that he believes in this fact that he is a man of no choice. Such words intensify the pessimistic tone of this short story. Moreover, there is no sentiment or moralizing reflected in the language of the character. Furthermore, Writer uses some words which contain taboo meaning to show his sordid life. An important point in this short story is its title, i.e. *A Man in the Cage*. Using the phrase "in the cage" pictures the main character as trapped by environment. In the case of literary devices and figural language it should be notice that although some devices like similes, metaphors and personification are used, they are not a driving force through the course of this short story.

Another aspect of this story that emphasizes on its naturalistic content is its plot. The story starts in the middle and then flashes back to show a general view of his whole life up to present in order to show the serenity and indifference of nature amid his struggle. Thus, the reader is introduced to the main character, Seyed Hassan Khan, and then the events of the short story are set in motion to show how the environmental influences have determined his outcome. It worth mentioning the story's dominant conflict is man against nature. If the dog is supposed to be a part of nature, he is evidently the loser. In addition to these, the work's surprise ending that demonstrates nature's indifference toward him and his only source of solace.

Another factor is the setting that reflects a commonplace and unheroic life, which is the dull routine of daily existence. Whatever this setting suggests is that life on its lowest level is not as simple as it seems to be.

Turning to subject matter, one is noticed that it deals with some raw and unpleasant experiences like being deformed, losing his wife, losing his mistress female-dog, stealing what he liked from his friend, living a lovely life and fearing of being emotionally injured by the other people, imprisoning himself in his house which reduced him to "degrading" behavior, and so on. Like most naturalistic characters, he belongs to the middle or lower classes, poor and unsophisticated. On the other hand, as Walcutt [ibi] expresses there is a "brute within" the naturalistic characters. Here, the main character possesses strong and warring emotions and passions, such as lust or sexuality and the desire for excessive pleasure through addicting opium which cause him to be dispatched from social life and tries to be satisfied in his solitude.

All of the points mentioned in this part represent that as a naturalistic author Choobak acts artistically through his characterization, using appropriate language, plot, milieu, and subject matter to highlight the sordid conditions of the main character's life and situation.

10 Conclusion

In answering to the research's question, it should be mentioned that *A Man in the Cage* is a naturalistic short story and its naturalism is verified through having naturalistic element like naturalism in characterization, plot, language, setting and subject matter. On the other hand, Choobak as its writer try to stays detached and not being emotionally gets involved with the helplessness of the main character. A disgusting and pessimistic tone overwhelms this short story. So, it can be concluded that establishing a setting and forming a series of incidents in which a man as a helpless and desperate creature in a sordid life enters in the realm of naturalism. Consequently, this work with all above mentioned features is a naturalistic short story.

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