

An Exploration of ‘Unhomely Moments’ in Sadegh Hedayat’s *Stray Dog*

Oroskhan, M. H.* and Zohdi, E.

Department of English Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Vali-e-Asr University, Rafsanjan, Kerman, Iran

ABSTRACT

By the 20th century, transnational immigration escalated sharply. This has caused a feeling of displacement among immigrants due to the oscillation between two geographical places, the native or ancestral land and the foreign land. Consequently, the concept of “home” has taken on an added importance at a time of multiple journeys for immigrants across the world. Interestingly, in some cases, the person is not dispossessed of a place to live; however, he/she does not feel at home in the “new home”. This feeling of not belonging to a particular place is described by Homi K. Bhabha as “unhomeliness”. An “estranged” sense of “unhomeliness” emerges when one lives in a place which is not his/her real home. Accordingly, Iranian Intellectuals like Sadegh Hedayat who went abroad to gain the latest knowledge, mentally absorbed Western knowledge and they could never feel at home again. Of our subject, Hedayat could never feel at home because he never succeeded in leading to a consensus between his traditional Iranian culture and the modern Westernised culture. In this respect, Hedayat’s *Stray Dog*, a short story written in 1943, clearly portrays this feeling of never-belonging to any home. The story narrates the life of a dog (Pat) who is caught between two worlds, his motherland and the foreign land. Finally, it is suggested that the life of this dog, an unclean animal for some Muslims, exemplifies that of Hedayat himself whereby both experienced a sense of ‘unhomeliness’.

Keywords: Diaspora, unhomely moment, Homi Bhabha, Hedayat’s *Stray Dog*

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E-mail addresses:

h.araskhan@yahoo.com (Oroskhan, M. H.)

esmaeil_zohdi@yahoo.com (Zohdi, E.)

* Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

The connotation of home and ‘unhomed’ in postcolonial studies is centred around the diasporic subject. Indeed, the home turns into a significant nucleus in the schema of social networks established among the diasporic subject. Therefore, the concept

of home and 'unhomed' is contingent upon acquiring a good sense of the notion of diaspora. Considering its origin, diaspora means "scattering of seeds" (Anthias, 1998, p.560). However, as a concept, diaspora has a long history, initially used to illustrate the dispersal of the Jewish people from their homeland. Thus, the concept "underwent an amazing inflation that peaked in the 1990's, by which time it was being applied to most of the world's people" (Dufoix, 2008, p.1). Nowadays, diaspora is an all-embracing term that signifies people who have been uprooted from their native place through migration, immigration or exile. Therefore, it can be said that diaspora implies a "dislocation from the nation-state or geographical location of origin and relocation in one or more nation-states, territories, or countries" (Briziel & Mannur, 2003, p.1). When the diasporic subject crosses the geopolitical border, he or she encounters wide-ranging new experience and reality. Therefore, it is clear that the diaspora should have various interests and interaction with the homeland. For some in the diaspora, the homeland is described "as a sacred place filled with memories of past glory and bathed in visions of nobility and renaissance" (Levy & Weingrod, 2005, p.5). One of the central aspects of diasporic experience is "a strong attachment to and desire for literal return to a well - preserved homeland" (Clifford, 1994, p.305). This shows that diasporic subject never forgets his/her attachment to the homeland. When the diasporic subject is torn between his homeland and the

foreign land, defining the concept of home within the domain of diaspora becomes an intricate, and multifaceted task because it ends in the plurality of 'homes' and 'belongings'. In this case, we are faced with a multilayered notion which is not based on a fixed concept. As Walters explains "The notion of diaspora can represent multiple, pluri-local, constructed location of home, thus avoiding ideas of fixity, boundedness, and nostalgic exclusivity traditionally implied by the word home" (1994, p.16). The relation between diaspora and the native place of origin is represented by equivocation and psychological uneasiness because the diasporic subject is situated between two different homes. Moreover this ambivalence toward the concept of home is continued until "a fundamental ambivalence is embedded in the term diaspora: a dual ontology in which the diasporic subject is seen to look in two directions—towards a historical cultural identity on one hand, and the society of relocation on the other" (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1994, p.425).

When the diasporic subject is relocated from his homeland, he should deal with a new place with all the different characteristics. The most basic feature ahead of the diasporic subject is the difference between the physicality of the new place and the old one which persistently reminds him of his homeland. Surely, home is unavoidably associated with the physicality of the homeland. And it becomes "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (Brah, 1996, p.192). In this case, home also suggests the delighted experience of a

locality. One will be grasped by "its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, somber grey skies in the middle of the day...all this, as mediated by the historically specific every day of social relations" (Brah, 1996, p. 192). In this respect, one does not need to explain it to a native so long as it is the place of the most intimate relationship which also contributes to our personal memories. In this sense, those groups displaced from their native lands yearn to return to their homeland. However, as soon as the expansion of the home is exposed to outside influences or the outside world and the privacy of the home is invaded, a strange feeling of uneasiness is evoked. Homi K. Bhabha described this state of one's feeling as the "unhomely" moment.

Homi Bhabha is one of the prominent figures of postcolonial studies. He has contributed to this field by introducing and developing challenging ideas such as hybridity, ambivalence, uncanny, time-lag and the unhomely. In his view, a moment of ambivalence is created when two cultures are mingled together and the colonised and the coloniser interact with each other. Therefore, a new culture with distinguished features is created and this dynamic, interactive, and tension-packed process is what Bhabha names as hybridity. This is a social process which ends in developing unhomeliness in the colonised. (Bressler, 2011, p.205).

In his book, *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha provides a definition of

'unhomeliness'. He believes the colonised subject long for his or her background and in this process, he cannot fully fit in. Bhabha refers to the intervention of the subject's memory as a "negating activity" which forces the subject to experience an estranged sense in his/her present time. Later, he calls this feeling of "estrangement" the "unhomely" or being "unhomed":

The negating activity is, indeed, the intervention of the 'beyond' that establishes a boundary, a bridge, where the 'presencing' begins because it captures something of an estranged sense of the relocation of the home and the world-the unhomeliness - that is, the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. (Bhabha, 1994, p.9)

Bhabha borrows the term "unhomely" from Sigmund Freud. Freud's term, *Das Unheimlich*, is most often translated into English as "the uncanny," meaning that which is strange or unsettling though Freud meant more than this in his use of the term. However, *Das Unheimlich* is something that is both strange and familiar at the same time. According to him, "heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich" (Freud, 1995, p.220). Thus, Bhabha develops Freud's notion of *Das Unheimlich* or the uncanny into an unhomely context whose familiarity and unfamiliarity are disturbed. "The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence". (Bhabha, p.11). On

this condition, “unhomed” does not denote being homeless. The ‘un’ in unhomely works as an antonymic prefix that deems contrary to the root word ‘home’. Therefore, to experience the moment of ‘unhomely’, as Lois Tyson mentions in *Critical Theory Today*, “is to feel not at home even in one’s own home because you are not at home in yourself; that is, your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee” (2006, p.421). Bhabha has extensively pondered on this notion and explicated the terror affiliated with the loss of the one’s recognisable self. He believes that “The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of ‘incredulous terror’”. In another word, “unhomeliness” is a sense which makes you feel lonely at your home because you are not at home with yourself; you persistently oscillate between different cultures resulting in you becoming a psychological refugee with no place to take refuge in and feel peacefully and therefore, you fail to produce a new subjectivity. Similarly, the central theme of the Hedayat’s *Stray Dog* is based on the problem of displacement of the protagonist who is suffering from a split personality.

Sadegh Hedayat

Sadegh Hedayat was an exceptional talent in modern Persian literature as a result of modernism in Persian fiction (Katouzian, 2008, p.1). He was born on 17 February 1903 in Tehran and committed suicide in a small rented apartment in Paris on 9 April

1951. The author of *Majm‘ al-Fosaha, Riyaz al-‘Arefin* and *Rawza al-Safa-e Naseri* is mostly noted for his symbolic innovative technique of writing which distinguishes him from the authors of classical Persian literature. In his writing, he tried to show the “metaphorical classification of Iran in the two forms glorious past and impure and rotten present” (Mahmoodi, 2012, pp. 44-45). His writing is culture-specific and describes different facets of Iranian life. He is mostly known for his masterpiece, *The Blind Owl*, which explores many facets of Western literary tradition like its genre and is “the most famous Persian novel both in Iran and in Europe and America” (Katouzian, 2008, p.1). Persian literature owes its gratitude to him because of “his use of modernist, more often surrealist, techniques in Persian fiction” (Katouzian, 2008, p.1).

Hedayat lived during an important historical period of time in Iran and his writings appeared during the reign of Reza Shah which lasted for 20 years from 1925 to 1941. Although the country was never fully and officially colonised during this period, two imperial powers, the British and the Russians, had much economic influence over it. The French were at the peak of their intellectual reign during this period and many Iranians were tended toward them. As a result, many Iranian intellectuals had become doubtful about their past or the foundation upon which their identity is built. Homa Katouzian in his book *Sadegh Hedayat: His Works and His Wondrous World* describes this generation of Iranian

Intellectuals having a critical outlook on their culture and history: "Hedayat's generation of intellectuals developed a critical approach toward history and culture into which they were born, forcing upon themselves the task of reinvestigating the very foundations upon which their identity and self-conception traditionally rested" (2008, p.44). Accordingly, it is justifiable to assert that Iranian intellectuals were 'intellectually colonised'. It seems plausible that Hedayat was at the top of his career during a period in which European imperialism had a great influence on Iranian Intellectuals. At the "turn of century Iranian thinkers internalized the incongruity between their inherited local realities and the appropriated Western models as a structural deficiency" (2008, p.44).

Hedayat's tendency and exposure in both Western and Eastern cultures situated him between two worlds. Taghi Modaresi, one of the celebrated authors of the generation after Hedayat, expresses his view about "Hedayat's life is a continuous oscillation between secure and safe atmosphere which is bounded to keep the honor of father's home and the foreign world" (Mahmoodi *et al.*, 2010, p.2). This oscillation between home and foreign world imposed some difficulties on the inner life of Hedayat and shows itself in the narratives of Hedayat and narratives of this period, "Past and present, culture and history, inherited ideals and adopted values merged in the narratives of this period" (Katouzian, 2008, p.44).

Hedayat's life is a perpetual vacillation between the secure and safe atmosphere of the homeland for which he felt honoured and the foreign world for which he was deeply absorbed in as the fountain of his inspiration that contributed to his innovation of story writing. Hedayat's tendency toward the West left him in a terrible situation in which he could not feel peace. He was always in search of a home in which he could feel relaxed and as a result, his suicide has been deemed as "a symptom of his inability to cope with the differences between his own culture and that of Europe" (Rahimieh, 1989, p. 16).

Hedayat has written many short stories tackling many issues. Katouzian has categorised his writings into: "romantic nationalist fiction, critical realist stories, satire and psycho-fiction" (Katouzian, 2008, p.7). Thus, *Stray Dog* can be considered as "one of Hedayat's best psycho-fictions" (Katouzian, 2008, p.178). It should be noted that the term "psycho-fictional" was coined by Katouzian in 1970s to specifically describe Hedayat's works; it differs from the category of 'psychological novel'. In her view, psycho-fictional stories reflect "subjective nature of the stories, which brings together the psychological, the ontological and the metaphysical in an indivisible whole" (Katouzian, 2008, p.10).

In *Stray Dog*, Hedayat portrays the life of a desperate modern man in the form of an allegorical story. This message is carried over by a stray dog named 'Pat' which gets lost in Varamin, a city near Tehran, and

rambles around while being kicked and cursed by almost everyone it comes across.

Hedayat beautifully expresses the internal sense of self-alienation and self-separation from one's homeland by delving into the dog's psyche and provide a perfect example for understanding the tragic existence of a human being torn between two worlds,

Stray Dog describes a dog's psyche while going through the trauma of alienation, helplessness and physical torture, and his feelings, desires, hopes and sense of nostalgia ... make it accessible to human understanding as an instance of the tragedy of existence (Katouzian, 2008, p.178).

Wandering and straying is a familiar theme among Hedayat's psycho-fictions, except this is played by an animal not a human being. The aim of this study is to explore the diasporic subject's ongoing vacillation between the secure homeland and the strange atmosphere of a foreign world.

The concept of home in Hedayat's Stray Dog

Hedayat writes prose in both Persian and French focusing on exiled people and the incessant dialogue that occurs between being in exile and home that seems to shape the subject's identity. Therefore, home and the loss of home has become a central motif in colonial and postcolonial literatures.. In this regard, Hedayat's impulse to search for 'home' has lured him into a complex web of metaphors of home in *Stray Dog* because it surrounds the psychic and

physical experience of the colonised (Pat) and coloniser (his owner).

Stray dog opens with a description of a place which barely has the necessary requisite of a prosperous life. At this place, only the essence of life is provided for the people. There were "several small shops designed to satisfy hunger and other primitive needs of life" (Hedayat, 1995, p.1). This viewpoint is expressed by someone who has been abroad and astonished by the advanced Western civilisation. This astonishment shattered the confidence of the Iranian intellectuals and they felt compelled to question the uniqueness of Iranian civilization. This perspective led them to a:

Rejection of the traditional world views that postulate God at the center of things and human souls as having the prospect of unending spiritual salvation encouraged them to find themselves as figures who are separated and unappreciated by society (Mahmoodi et al., 2011, p.1)

At this juncture, we encounter a person who feels alienated and rejected in a deformed society. From now on, the 'unhomely moment' initiates and relates the traumatic ambivalences of the "hero". This ambivalence and psychological apprehension is the result of the connection between diasporic subject and his native place of origin which shows the former being torn- between two different homes. The Iranian diaspora can make a connection with his/her homeland as a result of being

exposed to Western civilization but the Iranian society is reluctant to welcome such people especially by the traditional and religious segments who view the former as irreligious, "In their eyes, the torture of an unclean dog, cursed by religion and possessed of seven lives, was quite natural and worthy of eternal reward. To please Allah, they beat him" (Hedayat, 1995, p.1).

It is probable that a dog is chosen as the protagonist of this short story, is to show the dishonourable situation the Iranian intellectuals. In many Islamic countries a dog is regarded as an 'unclean animal'. In the story, this dog whose name is Pat invokes some pleasant moments from his memory. "Whenever he looked at the field, the animal instinct in him revived and with it came pleasant memories of the past (Hedayat, 1995, p.2)". It is the unhomely memory of home, or the remembrance of loss that is further disrupted by strange narrations of recent events. These memory flashes produce idyllic images of his family in a totally different world, as if from another planet. "This was his hereditary instinct; all his ancestors were bred to be free in the lush meadows of Scotland (Hedayat, 1995, p.2)". For him, home has become a "place of origin, or the place of settlement, or a local, national or transnational place, or an imagined virtual community, or a matrix or known experiences and intimate relations (Cohen, 1997, p.3)".

To illustrate this complex web of unknown experiences, Bhabha suggests the concept of "unhomely" and introduces a whole new perspective of homelessness. He

believes that homelessness is not confined to a stable category, since for the unhomely there is no spatial or conceptual reference of home. As Bhabha puts it, "Home may not be where the heart is, nor even the hearth. ... Home may be a mode of living made into a metaphor of survival" (Bhabha, 1997). Hence, the "home" or dwelling is persistently decorated with shadows of different individual and collective agony placed on the Ego. Numerous incidents of the past from layers of individual and collective memory intrude into the Ego's sense of the historical present and the world.

Pat searches his memory through the labyrinths of the past, citing the events which will help him preserve a collective memory romanticising his homeland and tries to connect it with the host homeland. And when he loses his homeland "suddenly, he had lost his mother and his brother; he had remained alone with his master" (Hedayat, 1995, p.3). At this moment, his master's place becomes his new place to live. Therefore, he feels responsible toward his new home in which he is living:

He felt bound to respond to his master's call, to scare strangers and stray dogs off his master's property, to play with his master's child, to treat those he knew differently from strangers, to eat on time and to expect to be petted at a proper time (Hedayat, 1995, p. 3).

Though this new place is not endowed with the features of his lovely homeland, he is still enjoying his time there because he feels a sense of belonging there. Although the time he used to spend with his brother was unforgettable, now he is happy that

he has a new friend “his master’s son. He would run after his new friend at the end of the garden, barking and biting his clothes” (Hedayat, 1995, p.3). Pat was really happy with his new friend and could still go on with his life easily. As time goes, an apprehension grows between where he is from and where he is at which causes the diasporic subjects (Pat) to form his own space. Therefore, he straddles between the two cultures. Yet, the painful memories of previous ‘home’ and the attempt to adapt to his new home foreground his feeling of alienation. He is like a pendulum vacillating between nostalgia for the homeland and the struggle to shape his present out of his new home. He cannot bear staying in this situation for a long time because this cannot be permanent. This situation, as Bhabha discusses it, is not a “transcendental passage (1997, p.447) but a “moment of transit” (Bhabha, 1997) in which the collusion of the different homes produces a sense of struggle which would compel the subject to “frame and name... social reality” (Bhabha, 1997).

In the story, Pat is also willing to frame his own social reality and thus, abandons his responsibility and tries to find his own way by joining a bitch:

His master’s voice, cumbering him as it did with every duty and responsibility, had a special effect on Pat, but a force above and beyond the forces of that alien world pressed him to stay with the bitch. This obligation dulled and deafened his ears to the sounds of that world (Hedayat, 1995, p.3).

However, Pat is not lucky enough and is unable to find a mate to form a union out of all this ambivalence and psychological apprehension; his attempt to create a new subjectivity fails. Thus, he enters a state where he has almost completely lost any physical existence; his symbolic appearance as a dog is the mask of an un-presentable identity or as Bhabha says, an identity of “no presence” (1994, p.294). The fragmented narrative, which is in the form of repeated patterns of restrained sorrow and pain, stain the neat usual order of his present. The timeless pain is thus portrayed as an unhomely moment. And as time goes on, his desolation escalates and while he is emotionally emptied, he yearns for love and kindness:

He needed to be fondled. His eyes begged for love and he was ready to give his life for anyone who would be kind to him and pet him on the head. He needed to convey his love to someone, to sacrifice himself and to show his devotion and loyalty, but it seemed that no one needed such an outpouring of affection; nobody took his side, and in every eye he saw nothing but enmity and malice (Hedayat, 1995, p. 4).

Home is endowed with relationships, bonding and a pool of collective memories that presume identity and nativity and it shapes a longing when it is dissipated. Thus, it is common sense to assert that the concept of homeland is recognised with a significantly interactive, romantically involving, and gracious aspect. Clearly, when you experience a loss of home, it

compels you to search for a location where the self could belong, a secure socio-political, cultural and intellectual space one could describe as home. For Pat, it became impossible to find a place so as to feel at home and live peacefully. Each and every land indicated a strange dwelling for him because every element and event of this land appears strange due to its uniqueness and absence from the homeland's scenario: "He did not recognize this world he was entering. In it no one shared his sentiments and ways (Hedayat, 1995, p.4).

As the story ends, Pat eventually finds out the truth that he belongs to neither of two places namely his master's home or his homeland and he is not able to form a private sphere. Therefore, he comes to this point that "All this effort had been useless. He knew neither why he was running, nor where he was running. He was spent and there was no way out" (Hedayat, 1995, p. 5). He finally realised he had no prospect for the future. And at last, while he was trying to run after car with the hope of finding a reliable home so as to be rid of the city in which he has been trapped, he loses his sensation and lies down on the ground with two vultures waiting to take his eyes out.

CONCLUSION

During the reign of Reza Shah, Iranian intellectuals were caught between the world of modernity and tradition. One of these Iranian intellectuals is Sadegh Hedayat who was faced with contradictory social and cultural situations. He spent most of his

life trying to figure out a stable connection between his tradition and the modernity. However, he never succeeded and this is appropriately portrayed in his short story *Stray Dog* with the dog committing suicide. Hedayat never felt at home and saw himself without any sense of belonging to any place.

He had has tried to describe the desperate status of Iranian intellectuals like himself in his writing. This expression which is an appropriate expression of an 'unhomely' moment is well described in *Stray Dog*. This concept of 'unhomely moment' was well developed by Homi Bhabha. He borrowed this term from Freud but changed its context to express a situation in which the subject's past memory is merged with the present time and a strange feeling is created in the present time due to this intervention. Bhabha has researched on this topic extensively. He recognised the terror affiliated with this sense of doubleness between the past and the present time. He believes that the oscillation between these two worlds, created in the subject's mind, results in the diasporic subject to feel lonely. Pat is persistently trying to find his collective sense of safety and stability in the home to avoid this sense of loneliness; nevertheless, he is rejected every time. Therefore, the concept of home, with its associations and affinities are defined within and sometimes flourished, never became attainable for Pat due to the intervention of the past memories into the present time.

At the end of the story, this nostalgia for the homeland\ is unattainable for him. And it takes the shape of avoid which is never

fulfilled in his mind finally causing him to commit suicide. Hence, in the present study, our focus was to discover the meaning of the concept of home in Hedayat's *Stray dog*. Hedayat successfully depicted the desperate unhomed situation of Iranian individuals through his protagonist, Pat, a dog, an 'unclean animal' in much of the Muslim world. As a result, the external and internal psychological trauma leads the diasporic subject into final destruction and death.

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