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| **Your article** |
| **Hedayat, Sadegh (1903–1951)** |
| Sadeq Hedayat | Sādeq Hedāyat | Sādegh Hedāyat | صادق هدایت | هادی صداقت |
| File: Hedayat\_portrait.jpg  Figure 1 Last portrait of Hedayat in 1951  Sadegh Hedayat (1903–1951) was an Iranian writer and intellectual who was highly influential in forming Iranian literary Modernism. His short stories and novellas set the best examples of such literary forms in Persian literature, which was up until then exclusively defined by its old traditions of classical poetry. Hedayat also contributed to the Iranian experience of modernity by forming intellectual circles and promoting critical thinking toward the norms and traditions of Iranian culture and society. While his major contributions in writing were short stories and novellas, he also wrote plays, essays, satirical pieces, folklore studies, travelogues, and translated several works by European Modernist authors into Persian. His own works, in turn, were translated into other languages. Most notably, his magnum opus, The Blind Owl, is translated into about 30 languages. Among the major themes in his works are the absurdity of human existence, the psychological sufferings and alienation of modern characters, and the hypocrisy, follies, and pains of Iranian traditional lower class. Hedayat spent a few years of his 20s in Europe, and during that time, not only did he learn a lot about the Western culture, but also gained a deeper understanding of Iranian society and culture through that knowledge. He always maintained a sharp critical outlook toward his environment, and this was reflected both in his works and personal life. |
| Life Sadegh Hedayat was born in 1903 in Tehran, Iran, into a declining aristocrat family with connections to both Qajar and Pahlavi courts and relatives holding government posts as high as the prime minister. He went to the progressive schools of Tehran including the École Saint-Louis, where he learned French and was drawn towards modern Western literature. During this time, he started writing and publishing his first short stories and essays. These early works hint at some of his future themes such as the occult and the macabre, animal rights, and existential and ontological questions about human existence.  Hedayat was among the first cohort of students who were sent to Europe by the government in 1926 shortly after the Pahlavis replaced the Qajars. Troubled by the rigid rules of state-funded education and unimpressed by the subjects chosen for him, he spent over four years in Belgium and France, constantly struggling with field changes, moves, scholarship authorities, and above all, his dissatisfied and rebellious mind. However, these struggles – including an unsuccessful suicide attempt – were not all he took from his time in Europe. Time away from his studies was spent writing, reading, watching movies, listening to music, and most importantly observing. Hedayat was an acute observer of the modern culture and society, and unlike the majority of Iranian students who would remain insulated, he came back to Iran with first-hand experiences and a profound understanding of modernity and Modernism. When Hedayat returned to Tehran in 1930, he had written at least some early drafts of a few works, which he started publishing the same year. In Iran, besides constantly quitting government jobs, he continued writing and publishing despite the resistance of both the literary critics and the authorities toward his subversive ideas and Modernist style. Such criticisms, however, alongside his personal sense of disillusionment made him less prolific in the final years of the ‘40s. He returned to Europe in early 1951, and a few months later took his own life in Paris. Works During his rather short life, Hedayat wrote over 40 novellas, short story collections, plays, satirical pieces, translations, essays, travelogues, and folklore studies. Most of these, however, remained unpublished or were published limitedly during his life. Even today, some of his writings have remained obscure, partly due to the censorship but more because of the myth-like fame (or notoriety) around him and few of his works.  Among such works is *Būf-e Kūr* (*The Blind Owl*), a novella written probably in 1930, but published in 1937 manually by Hedayat and in 50 copies during a year-long trip in India. Hedayat did this in fear of censorship, and it was only after the occupation of Iran by the Allies during the Second World War and the relative freedom created after the abdication of Reza Shah that it was serialized in *Iran* newspaper in 1941 and published as a book the next year. *The Blind Owl* is the monologues of a hallucinatory narrator who is suffering agonies in a dark and corrupted world of the “scoundrels” and the “bitches.” A highly surrealist story, this book is known for smudging the lines between reality and imagination. The characters and events keep merging into each other in the non-linear repetition of gloomy images, creating a sense of the narrator’s nightmares. Its complicated – and in Iran, completely new – style alongside its dismal setting and shocking thoughts have made *The Blind Owl* Hedayat’s most famous work at home and abroad. Many critics see it as the pioneering Modernist work of Iranian literature. It was translated into French during Hedayat’s life time, and after that, it has been translated into about 30 other languages. Some of Hedayat’s contemporary Modernist writers have praised the book. It has been called a Surrealist masterpiece by the founders of the movement, André Breton and Philippe Soupault, and Henry Miller liked the book so much he tried to help adapt it into a movie, albeit with no success[[1]](#endnote-1). The book was adapted into film by several Iranian and non-Iranian directors, most notably in 1987 by the Chilean avant-garde filmmaker, Raúl Ruiz.  While Hedayat wrote other works – *Three Drops of Blood*, *Buried Alive*, and *Stray Dog* among others – that could be grouped with *The Blind Owl* in their existential and psychological content, he also wrote less individual works, attacking the religious and sociocultural norms of Iranian conventional society. Among such works are *Mister Hadji*, *Mister Bow-wow*, for which he got banned, *The Myth of Creation*, *An Islamic Mission in the West,* and *The Morvari Cannon,* none of which were published during his life time, especially because of their harsh criticism of Iranian society and culture. Iranian Modernity and Modernism Hedayat had an important role in modernizing Iranian literature, and this was made possible partly by his profound understanding of Western Modernist art and culture. He was influenced by the likes of Maupassant, Poe, Woolf, and Faulkner, and this is reflected in his pioneering work on Iranian short story and novella, forms that were almost non-existent at a time when prose was just becoming a literary device. He did not shy away from using Persian in novel ways that could be viewed as outrageous by those who were used to the centuries-old conventions of Iranian literature. According to Farzaneh (1988), he highly praised Joyce and his innovative techniques, stating that “literature is divided into before and after Joyce” (p. 195). During his first time in Europe, Hedayat was exposed to and influenced by the Expressionist cinema of the 1920s’[[2]](#endnote-2). In addition to introducing new forms and styles, Hedayat was among the first Iranian writers who made the earthly concerns of the modern man the subject matter of his works. He openly discussed the dark sides of human existence, and in a culture that encouraged spirituality and trust in the metaphysical good, he did not hide his skepticism and the absurdity he saw in human life. He introduced Kafka by translating a few of his works into Persian, and his introduction on “In the Penal Colony,” titled “Kafka’s Message” has turned into an independent and important work, seen as Hedayat’s manifesto on nihilism.  Besides his contributions to the Iranian literary Modernism, Hedayat was also influential in forming the intellectual currents that were part of Iranian experience of modernity. He was among the first to live the Bohemian life of gathering in modern cafés with friends, drinking, smoking, and discussing the arts, culture, philosophy, and politics[[3]](#endnote-3). Even his vegetarianism would be considered an idiosyncratic rarity at that time and place. However, Hedayat’s real influence was not only in having a dropout lifestyle. With his criticism of tradition and promotion of ‘*change’*, Hedayat started new debates that are still relevant in Iranian society and culture. He was the centre of a literary circle, named Rab’a (a humorous distortion of the word “Four” in Arabic) in opposition to a group of classical literary scholars called Sab’a (“Seven” in Arabic). Katouzian (1991) notes that Hedayat and his circle "were all modern-minded and critical of the literary establishment” which they saw as “grave digging” and “the science of fossils,” and to show the extent of their contempt claims that they even had a list of classical literary figures, dead or alive, that they believed should be hanged, symbolically albeit (pp. 52-4). What is for sure is that Hedayat was part of Iran’s movement toward modernity. He was born into Iranian Constitutional Revolution, a fundamental movement toward breaking with tradition and adapting new ways within the socio-political sphere, and living through such changing times, he remained loyal to the idea of *change*. Disillusionment and Suicide His dedication to change, however, was not embraced by most of Iranians, both within the political and artistic elite and the ordinary people[[4]](#endnote-4). His relentless criticism of Iranian society and culture was not welcomed by the authorities. His literary style, combining the deeply-rooted elements of Persian language and culture with experimental Modernist techniques, was sometimes seen as a sign of his illiteracy in using the language properly[[5]](#endnote-5), and his openness in talking about the absurdity of human life was seen as dangerous pessimism. Parents were, and some still are, worried if their children read his works, as the rumour has been that *The Blind Owl* might trigger suicides among its readers.[[6]](#endnote-6) This is while many have not even read Hedayat, but his seemingly bizarre content, form, and lifestyle gained him a reputation that he despised.[[7]](#endnote-7) As evident in his letters and conversations with friends, all of this greatly disappointed Hedayat, and despite his attempts to keep working, he increasingly saw himself as unfit for his environment.  Deeper understandings of Hedayat and his work started forming after his suicide in 1951 in Paris. Thousands of books and articles have been written on Hedayat and his oeuvre, and he is constantly discussed in documentaries, fictional movies, TV programs, and even through quotes, memes, and references in pop culture. The sheer volume of works on Hedayat after his death shows his significance in Iranian Modernism and modernity.  File: deer\_drawing.JPG  Figure 2 Hedayat drew this on a postcard to his brother when he was in Paris in 1928 |
| Further reading:  (Katouzian, 1999) (Beard, 1990) (Farzaneh, 1988) (Farzaneh, Ashnaee ba Sadegh Hedayat (Vol. 1), 1988) (Sanati, 2003) (Fischer, 2004) |

1. Breton’s quote can be found in Beard (1990, p. 79), and Soupault and Miller’s are documented in Farzaneh (1988, p. 195). Both books are listed in “Further Readings.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For a detailed discussion on this and the names of some of these movies, refer to Farzaneh (pp. 105-11). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In a documentary titled *From No. 37*, Iranian pholospher, Ramin Jahanbagloo, refers to Hedayat as the “Modern Flâneur,” drawing on the concept that Walter Banjamin developed out of Charles Baudelair’s poetry, one of Hedayat’s favourites. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Farzaneh (1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . For more on the misinterpretations of Hedayat, see Fischer (2004, p. 181) and Sanati (2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Farzaneh (Vol. 1). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)