Iranian Studies (2025), 1–26
doi:10.1017/irn.2025.10090

Association for Iranian Studies
انجمن ایران‌پژوهی

ARTICLE

Historical Fantasy: exploring the Spectrums of Fetishism and Nostalgia in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*

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(Received 16 February 2025; revised 10 July 2025; accepted 14 July 2025)

Abstract

This article explores the interplay between the individual and the collective in *The Blind Owl* and illustrates how a distinctive historical perspective emerges from its complex allegorical form. A close reading of the novel reveals how the text superimposes biographical and cultural pasts through the juxtaposition of sexual fetishism and nostalgia, presenting both as symptoms of a fraught relationship with one's infantile and cultural histories. The article reads *The Blind Owl* as a satirical critique of a figure whose conflicting desires to commemorate and forget the past drive a series of fetishistic behaviors, culminating in failure. Ultimately, the novel offers a cynical reflection on the nationalist nostalgia cultivated by traditionalist intelligentsia within the peripheral modernity of early twentieth-century Iran.

Keywords: allegory; nationalism; nostalgia; peripheral modernism; sadeq hedayat; twentieth-century Iran

As a uniquely subjective narrative that explores the deepest thoughts, sensations, and desires of its character through an interior monologue—the murmurs of a psychotic, anonymous narrator to his shadow—*The Blind Owl* marks a groundbreaking entry in the evolution of the Persian novel.[1]Despite this individualistic aspect of the work, it mysteriously engages with the larger collective context. Numerous reflections have regarded the novel as one that critically engages with Iranian history, mythology, the Persian literary tradition, and even invisible but deeply entrenched cultural dichotomies. Reza Bareheni, the prominent writer, critic, and tutor of modern fictional prose from the succeeding generation, describes *The Blind Owl* as a novel that transgresses a single historical period and extracts the binary opposition of ethereal versus harlot in Iranian cultural history, revealing its "structural essence."[2]Baraheni argues that the novel is historical despite hardly presenting any factual information. This conclusion may sound far-fetched. Nevertheless, it reflects the general attitude of subsequent Persian modernists regarding how a great novel should engage with history.

This article investigates the intersections between individual and collective experience in *The Blind Owl*, with a particular focus on history. Considering "history" as both the past

[1] Hedayat, "Buf-e kur." In this article, the following translation is used unless otherwise indicated: Sadeq Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, trans. D. P. Costello (Grove Press, 2010).

[2] Baraheni, "Adabiyāt-e irani-e moʾāser," 103.

and the way in which the contemporary individual recollects that past, I aim to explore first whether the novel holds a distinct historical perspective, and second how that historical perspective emerges out of what appears to be an extremely subjective and autobiographical narrative. Ultimately, I aim to shed light on those narrative strategies and rhetorical devices that help this story of personal anxieties and frustrations gain a political charge.

To read *The Blind Owl* in such a framework was first suggested by Michael Beard.[3] Comparing the novel with Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman,"Beard proposed that *The Blind Owl* mobilized sexuality in the same way that the Chinese example used the libidinal thrusts of eating.[4] "Reading *The Blind Owl* through the lens of Lu Xun's satire," continues Beard, "might provide an edifying comparison which helps us locate where social commentary shapes the otherwise opaque walls of *The Blind Owl*."[5]

Beard draws on Fredric Jameson's essay, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," without explicitly using the term "national allegory."[6] Jameson's essay has been criticized for employing the dubious term "third-world literature" and generalizing the vast and diverse world of non-Western literature under the rubric of "national allegory."[7] However, it lays the groundwork for conceptualizing an allegorical form capable of conveying political connotations without undermining characters' subjectivity.

Jameson's first case study, "Diary of a Madman," vividly illustrates how this allegorical process operates. This short story presents the notes of a delusional character who believes everyone around him is a cannibal. The narrative exhibits the objective features symptomatic of psychosis. At the same time, the perceived cannibalism is allegorically linked to Chinese society during the late-imperial and post-imperial period. Jameson contrasts this mode of representation with that found in Western literature, as in Kurtz's final words in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In Conrad's text, existential horror remains confined to a private, subjective mood. By contrast, "Diary of a Madman" projects its psychological narrative outward, addressing broader societal issues. The narrative achieves what Jameson terms "allegorical resonance," in which personal experience overlaps with the broader cultural one.[8] It implies that instead of treating the character's psychological state as an "unspeakable, unnameable inner feeling," the text figuratively ties it to the political and cultural context, politicizing the libidinal.[9] Without this figural, or allegorical, relationship between the individual and the collective, the story seems incomplete, because, lacking adequate biographical data, the reader cannot decide how to interpret the character's peculiar moods.

A critical reading of Jameson's essay informs the present article, particularly in interpreting *The Blind Owl* as a text that fuses cultural and psychological notions, such as nostalgia and fetishism, to create a distinctive allegorical form that dialectically reflects the specificities of its cultural field, namely the early twentieth-century Iran that struggles between the pulls of tradition and the forces of modernity. This superimposition of the private and the public, the libidinal and the political, and last but not least, the biographical and the historical is a remarkable formal feature of *The Blind Owl* seldom addressed in the extensive body of critical discussions surrounding the work. Furthermore, this study draws on Jameson's critical theory, as it portrays the cultural context against the backdrop of the capitalist world-system and analyzes the literary form in relation to the specific characteristics of that context.

[3] Beard, "Influence as Debt."
[4] See Lu Xun, *Selected Stories*.
[5] Beard, "Influence as Debt," 70.
[6] Jameson, "Third-World Literature."
[7] For one of the earliest and most referenced reflections on Jameson's essay, see Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric."
[8] Jameson, "Third-World Literature," 71.
[9] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To Jameson, modernity is a singular and universal phenomenon, intrinsically linked to the capitalist world-system, in which cultural developments reflect the dependencies and hierarchies inherent in global capitalism.[10] Just as economic relations between the core and periphery are shaped by dominance and exploitation, so are cultural exchanges, with artistic and intellectual movements in peripheral societies often responding to and resisting hegemonic cultural forms. Whereas postmodernism corresponds to the cultural logic of fully modernized societies under late capitalism, modernism emerges in peripheral societies undergoing an incomplete process of modernization, with modernist art expressing this distinct experience.[11]

> Modernism must … be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development, or to what Ernst Bloch called the "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous," the "synchronicity of the nonsynchronous" (*Gleichzeitigkeit das Ungleichzeitigen*): the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history.[12]

In its Trotskyist formulation, the theory of combined and uneven development describes a situation in which capitalist forms and relations existed alongside archaic forms of economic life and preexisting social and class relations.[13] This juxtaposition might arise when capitalist institutions, instruments, forms, and social relations developed in "advanced" societies are transported into societies deemed "backward" by Eurocentric timelines. Such modernization processes are typically top-down and elitist. The resulting transformation is marked by overlapping historical layers: disparate modes of production, clashing social relations, and amalgamated social and cultural forms. This phenomenon haunts the experience of peripheral cultures, as if they are simultaneously living in multiple and distinct historical eras.

Some scholars have visited Fredric Jameson's concept of national allegory within the broader framework of his theory of modernity, arguing that it provides a foundation for a systematic study of the aesthetics of the periphery.[14] This study contributes to such critical endeavors by examining the potentialities of allegory as an artistic means of expressing the "simultaneity of the non-simultaneous." I argue that the novel's fragmented timeline allegorizes a fractured historical experience in a peripheral context. Furthermore, I propose that the protagonist's obscure psychological states allegorically reflect the entanglements of a culture obsessed with a cherished image of its past while struggling for a modern identity.

My approach to *The Blind Owl* demands flexibility in methodology and a versatile theoretical framework. In my close reading of the text, I draw on a Freudian definition of "fetish" to explore its adjacencies with nostalgia and artistic representation, showcasing Hedayat's exploitation of these nuanced borders to create allegorical resonance. I also explain Hedayat's invention of imaginal processes of defetishization to generate tension-filled moments and evoke fantastic atmospheres. F. R. Ankersmit's historical theory underlies my discussion of the potential functions of nostalgia in societies transitioning from tradition to modernity. Ankersmit explores how cultures and civilizations go through processes of forgetting and remembrance, allowing them to detach from their previous

[10] Jameson, *Singular Modernity*.

[11] Lazarus, "Fredric Jameson."

[12] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 307.

[13] Warwick Research Collective, "World-Literature," 11. The article is authored by the Warwick Research Collective, a group of scholars writing collaboratively under a collective name.

[14] See, for example, Lazarus, "Fredric Jameson." Also, Majumder, "Case for Peripheral Aesthetics."

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

identities and embrace new ones.[15] He uses a variety of terms typically associated with individual psychological experience, with allegory not entirely absent from his language. This aligns well with the current literary analysis, which examines a similar process of allegorization but in the opposite direction, in which allegory projects the individual's psychological experience onto the collective experience.

This introductory section includes a plot summary of *The Blind Owl* to help clarify the arguments presented in the following sections. A review of relevant prior research is included to illustrate how the current study contributes to the existing scholarship on Sadeq Hedayat. In the following section, I analyze Hedayat's short story "The Doll behind the Curtain," illustrating Hedayat's expansion of the concept of fetishism beyond its libidinal roots, imbuing it with broader cultural significance.[16] This brief analysis demonstrates an allegorical narrative that is dynamic, does not diminish the character's subjectivity, and ties the psychological moods of the character to the broader cultural context. I also highlight the authorial narrator's explicit critiques of the protagonist and underscore thematic parallels between this short story and *The Blind Owl*. This analysis helps elucidate the implicit irony that *The Blind Owl* directs toward its narrator. In the third and fourth sections, I apply a Freudian psychoanalytic framework to exploring the narrator's perplexing chain of actions, driven by his recurring attempts to manage the anxiety from the return of the repressed. Terrified by the prospect of his idealized image of the past coming to life, he struggles to transform this living, threatening manifestation of the past into an innocent picture, but ultimately fails. A close reading of the text highlights the intricate interplay between nostalgia, fetishism, and artistic representation. Finally, in the fifth section, I investigate how these themes reflect the novel's engagement with the cultural entanglement of traditional and modern identities. Finally, in concluding remarks, I briefly discuss the significance of this article as a suggestion for further studies of the contemporary Persian novel within the framework of peripheral aesthetics.

Plot summary

The question of history in *The Blind Owl* arises primarily from its split structure, which consists of two main parts separated by nearly a millennium. The text is divided into five chapters, in which "three brief commentaries frame two major narratives."[17] However, the two major narratives, which we refer to as part 1 and part 2, are distinguished primarily by their temporal distance.

Part 1, which opens and closes the novel, is narrated by an anonymous artist who lives in a secluded area on the outskirts of Tehran. He makes a living out of painting on pencases; repeatedly depicting a scene: a bent old man in a turban sitting under a cypress tree, while a girl in a long black dress leans over a stream from the opposite bank, offering him a lily. The narrator recounts an incident that "shattered [his] entire being." Upon the unexpected visit of his uncle, a bent old man with an Indian turban, whom he has never met before, the artist/narrator reaches the top shelf for a bottle of old wine left by his parents. However, while standing on the stool, he glimpses through the ventilation hole the very scene for his paintings. Mesmerized by the woman's frightening, magic eyes, he spends the next two months and four days wandering the open fields around his house, desperately hoping to find the cypress tree, the stream, and the ethereal woman. His intense longing for the eyes leads him further into wine and opium. On the last night, returning from his futile wandering, he finds the ethereal woman sitting on a stone bench beside his door. He opens the door, and she walks into the artist's chamber like a sleepwalker and lies on his bed. Once again,

[15] Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*.
[16] Hedayat, "ʿArusak-e posht-e pardeh."
[17] Fischer, *Mute Dreams*, 184.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the protagonist reaches for his ancestral wine bottle to offer to his guest. As the woman's eyes are shut, he pours a glassful of wine into her mouth. Then he crawls up the bed and lies down beside the woman's dead body. The artist/narrator then attempts to draw the eyes on paper before they decompose. Thereupon, he dismembers the body with a bone-handled knife, puts it in a suitcase, and with the aid of a mysterious hearse driver—a bent old man he finds seated under a cypress tree—takes the suitcase to a desolate open field and buries it. As the old man digs the grave, he excavates an antique vase from the ancient city of Ray, wraps it in a dirty handkerchief, and takes it as pay. Later, when the narrator is lost on his way home, the old man gives him a ride and hands him the vase. In his chamber, the artist is shocked to find the face of the ethereal woman with the same frightening, magic eyes painted on the vase. Vexed by contradictory feelings, the artist smokes his whole stock of opium until he feels that the pressure over his chest is removed. He goes into a profound sense of tranquility and detachment from his own body. He is submerged in a deep dream and wakes up in another world.

Part 2 takes place roughly a thousand years earlier, in the old city of Ray (Rhages) during its medieval Islamic heyday. The narrator begins by vaguely confessing a crime he has recently committed. He anticipates the arrival of the police to arrest him and plans to commit suicide by drinking a glass from the bottle of poisonous wine he keeps on the top shelf. However, an irresistible urge brings him to write down everything.

> Whoever saw me yesterday saw a wasted, sickly young man. Today he would see a bent old man with white hair, burnt-out eyes and a hare-lip.[18]

The rest of the narrative serves to unveil this perplexing paragraph and how this metamorphosis has occurred. The narrator of part 2 grew up in his aunt's house, raised by a nanny who suckled him and the aunt's daughter, the girl he later married. The two make love, for the first and only time, beside the aunt's deathbed and, having been caught, are forced to marry each other. But ever since their marriage, the wife, whom the narrator calls "the harlot" (*Lakkāteh*), refuses to sleep with him. Instead, she hooks up with all "the rabble" (*rajjāleh-hā*), all the mundane men who seem to pique her interest, including the butcher and the old odds-and-ends man he frequently watches from his window. Although he despises his wife, he paradoxically desires her, or that bygone, innocent memory of her. The desire is so intense that it eventually sickens him, making him stay in his chamber, wholly detached from the world of the rabble. However, as the story unfolds, he finds himself extremely empathic to both the butcher and the old odds-and-ends man. Eventually, he climbs onto his wife's bed when the room is completely dark, and the woman takes him as her lover—the odds-and-ends man. He creeps into her bed, holding a bone-handled knife that his nanny has bought from the odds-and-ends man. They passionately make love. The woman bites the narrator so savagely that the bite goes through his lip. To break free from her, the narrator stabs her with the knife in his hand. Thereupon, he hurries back to his room, where he finds the woman's eye, drenched in blood, in the palm of his hand. A moment later, when he stands in front of the mirror, he is stunned to see the exact image of the old odds-and-ends man.

The novel ends with a short episode of the artist/narrator from the first part waking up from his dream. He then watches the old, bent man take the vase he had been given, bursting into horrifying laughter and running away. He turns to himself and sees that his clothes are torn and soiled from top to bottom with congealed blood. Two blister-flies fly around him, and tiny white maggots are wriggling on his body. He feels the weight of a woman's dead body on his chest.

[18] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 64–65.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A review of previous research

The temporal distance between part 1 and part 2 is addressed by Hedayat himself in his correspondence with the literary scholar and his companion, Mojtaba Minovi (1903–77).[19] The correspondence also reveals that "part 2 is a past 'remembered' as present in a state beyond normal consciousness."[20] Crucially, in response to a few cases of anachronisms that Minovi spots in this part, Hedayat argues that the whole of part 2 is a historical fantasy:

> This is not a historical novel, but a kind of historical *fantasie* [sic] which the narrator has imagined as a result of *simulation* [sic] or *instinct dissimulation* [sic] and has *romancée* [sic] in his own [contemporary] life. It is not a historical narrative, but something like an *inconscient* [sic] fiction.[21]

Even without this intertextual piece of evidence, that the whole of part 2 is "dreamed" by the artist/narrator of part 1 is made explicit in the text. The narrator specifically mentions that after smoking his whole batch of opium, he goes into a dream and wakes up in "a world which was ancient but which at the same time was closer and more natural to me than the other."[22]

As Arta Khakpour has observed, *The Blind Owl* constantly blurs the boundaries between reality and dream, challenging any hierarchical relationship between levels of reality.[23] This has led many critics to examine part 2 in parallel with part 1, focusing on interrelated scenes and repetition of details and leitmotifs that create symmetries and asymmetries. However, I would like to argue that the role of part 2 as a historical fantasy situated within the overarching narrative of part 1 is just as essential, for two main reasons.

First, in a narrative rich in psychoanalytical allusions, the function of dreams as potential conveyors of repressed and unconscious desires becomes particularly significant.[24] A fantasy can reveal the concealed desires that motivate the character and push the narrative forward. In this article, I will demonstrate that the narrator's fantasy aligns with the same wish he pursues throughout the novel. He fantasizes a tale about "an ancient partner-in-sorrow" who, unlike him, possesses the magical ability to capture the transcendental essence of the past in symbolic objects.[25] This partner manages to escape the polluted and horrifying reality, choosing instead to live with a cherished, idealized vision of the past.

Second, as a historical fantasy, the dream intersects with the biographical and cultural past. Set in the ancient and historical city of Ray, where the contemporary narrator resides atop its ruins, the dream transgresses the narrator's biographical lifespan, bridging the personal and collective experiences. I will further depict analogies and symmetries between part 1 and part 2 that map the personal domain of sexual fetishism and the cultural domain of nostalgia to one another. As a result, the whole narrative turns into an ironic critique of nostalgia; an immanent cultural attitude; and a rather conservative response to the rapid modernization of Iran in the early twentieth century.

A nostalgic and romanticized picture of the past was at the heart of the Iranians' encounter with modernity and the shaping of a modern national identity as far back as

[19] Katiraei, *Ketāb-e sādegh-e hedāyat*, 135.
[20] Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: Life and Legend*, 140.
[21] Ibid., 141.
[22] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 61.
[23] Khakpour, "Each into a World of His Own."
[24] See, for example, Meghdadi and Hamalian, "Oedipus and the Owl"; and Bryant "Hedayat's Psychoanalysis of a Nation." Also Meqdadi, "Oqdeh-ye odipi dar buf-e kur va seh qhatreh khun"; and Yavari, *Ravānkāvi va adabiyāt*.
[25] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 61.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11).[26] In the early twentieth century, Persian nostalgic sentiments were fostered by the promodernization intelligentsia and were primarily rooted in glorifying the achievements of pre-Islamic Persian emperors, contrasted with what was perceived as the nation's decline following the Arab invasion in the seventh century CE.

The Persian historical novel, arguably the first novelistic genre that appeared in Persian, was the most prolific form of fictional prose until the end of the first Pahlavi period (1941). It featured patriarchal sentiments, nostalgia for the glorious age of Great Persia, and historical data about Persian antiquity recently discovered by European Orientalists.[27] At the same time, a significant revival of Persian textual heritage was carried out by both domestic scholars and Western Orientalists. A notable group of Iranian intellectuals, often referred to as "Sabʾe" (the Seven), played a pivotal role in this cultural renaissance. The group comprised seven prominent Iranian scholars dedicated to the study and preservation of Persian literature, history, and culture. Their work involved critical editing of classical texts, conducting historical research, and fostering a renewed appreciation for Iran's pre-Islamic and Islamic heritage. This scholarly endeavor was part of a broader movement to reclaim and celebrate Iran's national identity during a period of modernization and Western influence.[28]

In its various forms and manifestations, nostalgic nationalism sought to foster national pride through a romanticized appreciation of its illustrious past. At the same time, it cultivated a sense of unity with the past during a period when rapid modernization drastically transformed the shape of Iranian cities and urban societies over roughly two decades.

In this cultural movement, Hedayat's role as a modernist intellectual remains ambivalent and controversial. He is renowned for his anti-Arab sentiments, a legacy of Iranian nationalism from the constitutional period, and his reproduction of an idealized vision of pre-Islamic Persia in his nationalist dramas.[29] Yet his engagement with history reveals a complex and evolving perspective.

Drawing a comparison between his nationalist dramas, Azadibougar has observed a shift in Hedayat's historical thinking.[30] Initially treating history as a source of validation for his fiction, Hedayat later challenged the reliability of historical narratives by juxtaposing historical events with their narrated forms.[31] This trajectory culminates in *The Pearl Cannon* (1947), in which Hedayat recounts a parodic antihistory of the world, filled with fabricated stories of conquests and colonizations, narrated in an amalgamated and parodic style. The work masterfully employs a diverse range of textual genres, creating a layered and ironic critique of historical narration. This was received as "a radically secular moment in Hedayat's work, when he deconstructs his nationalistic ideas."[32]

Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi has identified a growing skepticism toward Hedayat's earlier nationalist project in his later writings. In his psycho-fictions, particularly *The Blind Owl*, Hedayat narrates what Tavakoli-Targhi calls a "retrospective self"—a fractured and "schizochronic" subject who is simultaneously ancient and contemporary, Zoroastrian and Muslim, Aryan and Arab. This self, Tavakoli-Targhi observes, is haunted by "memory and forgetting, the past and the future, retrospection and prospection," and bears a striking resemblance to "the historical lamentations on the desperate conditions of contemporary Iran." Rather than presenting the subject as a heroic heir to a glorious Persian past, Hedayat

[26] Supplementary discussions related to the topic can be found in Zia-Ebrahimi, *Emergence of Iranian Nationalism*; and Amanat, *Iran*. Particularly, nostalgic nationalism in Hedayat's era and his earlier work are discussed in Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: Life and Legend*; and Tavakoli-Targhi, "Narrative Identity."

[27] Parsanasab, *Nazarieh va naghd-e romān-e tārikhi-e fārsi*; Sepehran, *Rad-e pā-ye tazalzol*.

[28] See Mahdizadeh and Shojaei, "Involvement of Western Orientalists"; and Chehabi, "Pahlavi Period."

[29] Ajoudani, "Hedāyat va nāsiyonālism".

[30] Azadibougar, *World Literature*.

[31] Ibid., 84.

[32] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

renders it a repository of contradictions—symbolically staging the collapse of nostalgic nationalism under the weight of its own internal divisions.[33]

Within this intellectual project, centered on the conceptualization of history, *The Blind Owl* assumes an even more striking position, especially when we consider its multiple overt intertextual links to *Parvin, Sasan's Daughter*, Hedayat's inaugural nationalist drama. Mashallah Ajoudani first highlighted the common motifs and themes shared between these two works: Ray, the Suran, and a painter who depicts the portrait of an astonishingly beautiful woman.[34]He interprets the novel in light of Hedayat's nationalistic thought, nostalgia for the pre-Islamic period, and detestation of Islamic-Arabic culture. He argues that *The Blind Owl* rearticulates similar nationalistic, anti-Arab, and anti-Islamic sentiments in a much more complex system of signification, avoiding explicitness. According to Ajoudani, the novel serves as an allegory attesting to the transformation from the brilliant Iranian culture to the Islamic-Arabic culture that the author so much detested.

In contrast, Houra Yavari has argued that the reuse of similar clusters of motifs and symbols in differing systems of signification destabilizes rather than reaffirms the dichotomous idealization/demonization evident in Hedayat's earlier historical drama.[35]

> Where the imaginal system of Hedayat's historical writings displays a persistent nostalgic representation of a glorified and romanticized past in a present that looks toward that lost glory for self-definition, the seemingly identical imaginal system in *Buf-e Kur* is redrawn to portray instead a vast, intractable, and timeless desert of memory wherein the narrator's obsessive engagement with history and memory delivers a radically altered concept of history and selfhood; one in which the once romanticized past loses its veneer of glory and the present becomes an enclosure haunted by an old odds-and-ends man whose response to the same idealized dreamscape of history is endlessly reiterated in his owl-like "grating, gooseflesh-raising peal of laughter."[36]

Yavari concludes that *The Blind Owl* is less about the past itself and more about nostalgia and the processes of reconstructing the past in the present. She argues that the novel critiques nostalgia as a failed strategy for identity construction in the contemporary Iranian individual.

The present article aligns in part with Yavari's conclusion, interpreting *The Blind Owl* as a satire of nostalgia, which had become the ideological backbone of national identity in early twentieth-century Iran. It further argues that the novel sharpens its critique by targeting a specific type of character—an individual consumed by cultural inheritance, yet paralyzed in the face of modernity's demands.

Hedayat is known for openly mocking the traditionalist scholar or historian who re-edited manuscripts, such as *Divān-e Hafiz*, for the hundredth time.[37] Together with three other like-minded companions, he formed a group called Rabʾe (literally "the Four"), a title that ironically parodied the more established group of Sabʾe. Within this circle, they disparaged the endeavors of traditionalists, referring to their work as "grave digging" and dismissing it as "the science of fossils."[38]

[33] Tavakoli-Targhi, "Narrative Identity," 107.
[34] Ajoudani, "Hedayat va nāsiyonālism." Also, Ajoudani, *Hedāyat, buf-e kur va nāsiyonālism*.
[35] Yavari, "Blind Owl."
[36] Ibid., 49.
[37] Farzaneh, *Āshnāyi bā sādegh-e hedāyat*, vol. 1, 27.
[38] Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: Work and World*, 2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Here, the narratological distinction between the narrator and the (implied) author becomes crucial to detecting the text's satirical tone.[39] This distinction is traditionally overlooked in critical engagements with *The Blind Owl*. Unlike critics who interpret the work as autobiographical, this article argues that the author portrays his character with contempt rather than sympathy.[40] I try to identify the implicit irony communicated by the implied author, pointing to the narrator's unreliability. Instead of viewing the novel as a representation of Hedayat's pantheistic worldview, I seek to approach it with caution, as one would listen to the words of a psychotic patient on a psychoanalytic couch.

This also reveals my implicit intention—to approach *The Blind Owl* as a "story" with a character who has particular desires, and a "plot"—however fragmented—that traces the sequence of events through which that character attempts to fulfill them. Although it may seem like a straightforward or even conventional narrative reading, this approach has been surprisingly rare in critical engagements with the novel. Yet it proves useful, especially because it foregrounds the narrator as a fictional construct, distinct from the author. Furthermore, if Yavari's conclusion relies primarily on the interpretation of isolated metaphors—such as the narrator's nightmare of hanging the odds-and-ends man—the present article shifts focus to the broader question of how the narrative generates meaning through plot and character, and how it constructs overlapping semantic domains through analogies, symmetries, and asymmetries to produce a distinctive allegorical form.

This perspective highlights the significance of the narrator's fantastic dream and its role within the broader narrative structure, offering an ideal point of departure for this analysis. As a fantasy, the dream potentially reveals the concealed desires that serve as the driving force behind the narrative's momentum. Identifying the constituent parts of this driving force is the prerequisite for understanding how the implied social criticism of nostalgic nationalism emerges from a psychoanalytic couch tale.

Allegory and politicizing the personal

In "The Doll behind the Curtain," Mehrdad, a young and naive Iranian student in Paris, falls in love with a window mannequin and later attempts to murder it! Mehrdad is a timid, fearful, sexually inexperienced, and depressed young man brought up on moral advice, with upbringing methods "suitable for only a thousand years ago."[41] Just before he leaves Iran, his parents arrange his engagement to his cousin, Derakhshandeh. Intimidated by stories about his classmates' romantic adventures, he finally makes up his mind to take all his stipend and savings and visit a casino. On his way, he sees a mannequin behind the display window of a clothing shop, falls in love with it, and spends all his money to buy it. Five years later, Mehrdad returns to his homeland. Everybody soon notices his indifference toward his fiancée and his peculiar relationship with a doll that he keeps behind a curtain.

> At night, when he returned home, Mehrdad would close the doors, play a song on the gramophone, pour himself a glass of wine, and draw the curtain aside, revealing the mannequin. He would then sit on the bench before her for hours, losing himself in her beauty. At times, under the influence of wine, he would stand, step forward, and gently touch her hair and her breast. His entire love life was confined to this ritual, and for him the mannequin embodied love, lust, and desire.[42]

[39] Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 147–51.

[40] For a distinctively autobiographical interpretation of the novel, see Hillmann, "Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*."

[41] Hedayat, "'Arusak-e posht-e pardeh," 82. For this short shory, all the translations from Persian are by me, unless otherwise stated.

[42] Ibid., 93.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Driven by jealousy and determined to win back his fiancée's love, Derakhshandeh begins to imitate the mannequin. She dresses like it, applies makeup to resemble it, and even tries to move and walk like a doll. This fills Mehrdad with mixed feelings, admiring her insistence but also holding a grudge against her. In the competition between the woman and the mannequin, Mehrdad gradually persuades himself that he must let go of the doll. Yet, he cannot convince himself to simply get rid of it and decides to shoot her with a revolver, as if killing a real human being. On the last night, Mehrdad moves aside the curtain, plays the gramophone, and drinks two consecutive glasses of wine. He sits on his chair, gazing at the mannequin for a long time. Then he gets up and moves toward it. But as soon as he touches her he feels "like he has touched red-hot iron."[43] In a moment of horrifying suspense, the mannequin begins to move toward him, laughing. Terrified and shocked, Mehrdad goes backward, reaches for the revolver in his pocket, and shoots three bullets, only to find out that he has shot Derakhshandeh dead!

Homa Katouzian has pointed to the striking similarity between descriptions of the doll in "The Doll behind the Curtain" and *The Blind Owl*'s ethereal woman.

> This was not a manikin [sic], it was a woman, no, even better, an angel. Those deep dark blue eyes, that noble and winning smile … were all beyond his ideals of beauty and love. Besides this girl [sic] would not talk to him, and he would not have to pretend to love her … or become jealous. She would always be silent, always beautifully represent the utmost of his ideals.[44]

Searching for roots or precedents of *The Blind Owl* in the author's earlier work, Katouzian recognizes a recurrent dichotomy between the ideal, the transcendental, and the inapproachable on one side, and the mundane, polluted, and unbearably real on the other. The comparison aims to support Katouzian's proposal that a paradox is embedded in the novel—one that also reflects Hedayat's broader worldview: "Imperfect life is not worth living and there is no road to attain perfection."[45]

> There is the longing for the perfect love of an equally perfect woman. Here too, the search is in vain, for the reality is "the harlot," and the ideal is a speechless apparition in the shape of "the ethereal woman": in "Puppet Behind the Curtain," these two figures are represented by Derakhshandeh and the puppet.[46]

To draw such a conclusion from "The Doll behind the Curtain" risks neglecting the omniscient narrator's overt commentaries, which consistently undermine Mehrdad's value system. Mehrdad falls in love with the mannequin not because of a profound idealism but because he is timid, spoiled, and incapable of forming a relationship with a real woman. It is because "his parents raised him, so they believed, to be chaste and virtuous, cultivating an embodiment of morals suited only for life two thousand years ago."[47] Such overt commentaries give the narrative a distinct satirical voice, seperating the authorial narrator's value system from that of his character. The narrator clearly states that, despite being twenty-four, Mehrdad "lacked the courtesy, experience, education, shrewdness, and bravery of a fourteen-year-old Western boy."[48]

[43] Ibid., 96.
[44] Ibid., 84. Translation from Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: Life and Legend*, 147.
[45] Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: Life and Legend*, 103.
[46] Ibid., 158.
[47] Hedayat, "ʿArusak-e posht-e pardeh," 82.
[48] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mehrdad's inability to adapt to the modern ways of Parisian life is precisely what drives him toward the mannequin. It is no coincidence that he encounters the mannequin on his way to a casino, seeking the pleasure his classmates frequently boast about. On a symbolic level, possessing the doll represents gaining control over those aspects of Western life that remain beyond his grasp. The doll serves as a fetish, not only in a sexual sense but also as a means for Mehrdad to overcome the anxiety from such unknown and unattainable elements of a culture in which he feels like an outsider. Elements like the sound of the gramophone, which first attracts him on the street just before he makes up his mind to buy the mannequin, and then plays every time he is having an intimate moment with it, reinforce the link between sexual and nonsexual desires. In other words, the sexual or libidinal drives of fetishism are sharpened into a cultural critique, giving the story an allegorical undertone.

Through the character of Mehrdad, Hedayat criticizes the backwardness of his contemporary Iranian culture and its inadequacy in facing the challenges of the modern world. Mehrdad's obsession with the mannequin becomes a reflection of his inner conflict, symbolizing both his failure to integrate into a modern, Westernized world and the inability of his cultural upbringing to prepare him for it. The mannequin becomes a surrogate for his unfulfilled desires, a static, controllable stand-in for an unattainable reality. Here, the allegory unfolds as Mehrdad's personal dysfunction is mapped onto a larger critique of Iranian society's struggle to reconcile traditional values with modern influences.

Frequent commentaries of the third-person omniscient narrator in "The Doll behind the Curtain," who openly judges and mocks Mehrdad, amplify the text's satirical tone. In contrast, *The Blind Owl* is narrated in the unreliable voice of a hallucinating and forgetful narrator. However, the thematic parallels between the two texts suggest another layer of irony in the latter. The similarity between Mehrdad and the painter's descriptions of their objects of desire suggests that the artist/narrator's transcendental love also might signify a deeper dysfunctionality—a fetishistic desire.[49]

Once again, although in *The Blind Owl* the narrator's obsession with the image he draws on pen cases might appear to be a form of fetishism, it transcends a purely sexual context. The image's ties to classical Persian literature and culture suggest a kind of cultural fetish or fetishistic nostalgia. The narrator's fixation on the image and its mysterious origins reflects a longing for something lost, situated at the intersection of personal and cultural memory.

Critics have acknowledged the association of the ethereal woman with a collective or cultural past. She is rooted in Persian miniature art; her "Turkoman eyes" recall descriptions found in Persian lyrical poetry; and the same eyes later appear on an antique jar from the ancient city of Ray.[50] The analogy between the suitcase containing her dismembered body and the jar, as noted by Ajoudani, reinforces this association.[51] The narrator, lying in the coffin space of the hearse while the suitcase rests on his chest, experiences "a profound sensation of comfort," disturbed only by the weight of the suitcase.[52] Later, after burying the body, he again lies in the coffin space, feeling the same comfort, but this time with the weight of the jar pressing against him. This parallel strengthens the connection between the ethereal woman and the national heritage.

Throughout *The Blind Owl*, humanist love (and fetishism) is intertwined with nostalgia—for an unknown spiritual origin, a lost childhood, or a cultural heritage. The text resists clear distinctions between these various forms of nostalgia.[53]For instance, in part 2, the

[49] For a compelling account of fetishism in *The Blind Owl*, particularly as it intersects with the aesthetics of the Western Gothic tradition, see Beard, *Hedayat's Blind Owl*, 163–71.

[50] Ishaghpour, *Bar mazār-e sādegh-e hedāyat*.

[51] Ajoudani, *Hedayat, buf-e kur va nāsiyonālism*.

[52] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 46.

[53] By "spiritual origin," I specifically refer to the mentions of India and the Lingam temple in part 2. These motifs receive limited attention in this article—not due to their insignificance, but because the essay frames the novel as

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narrator's memory of a childhood game of hide-and-seek is triggered by the phantom of a little girl, described in terms reminiscent of the ethereal woman. He initially believes her to be "one of the old-time inhabitants of the ancient city of Ray, forging a strong intertextual link with Hedayat's earlier nationalist drama *Parvin, Sasan's Daughter.*"[54] Such analogies, alongside the broader analogy between the two parts, intertwine various permutations of personal and collective nostalgia, paving the way for further association of nostalgia and fetishism, as will be discussed in the next section.

The association of nostalgia and erotism is commonplace in European romantic texts.[55] In *The Blind Owl*, however, such an association is initially evoked but immediately subverted when the ethereal woman appears on the porch of the narrator's house and soon afterward meets a violent end—her body dismembered in a grotesque and unsettling sequence. In the absence of an omniscient narrator's voice here, the narrator's subsequent actions establish a satirical voice that ironically undermines Iranian society's nostalgia for a past that feels increasingly distant yet disruptively present.

(Re-)killing an anthropomorphized fetish

A striking similarity between *The Blind Owl* and "The Doll behind the Curtain" lies in their shared uncanny moment when a fetish seemingly comes to life, prompting the protagonist's attempt to destroy it. The suspicion that the fetish might be alive saturates both the character and the narrative with the anxiety of the return of the repressed. Consequently, the protagonist's act of violence becomes an attempt to suppress the revoked fetish and alleviate the resulting anxiety.

In Freudian psychoanalytical terms, the sense of uncanniness has a close relationship with psychological defense mechanisms and the return of the repressed. In his 1919 article "The Uncanny," Freud renders a careful psychoanalytical reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann's fantastic story, "The Sandman," suggesting that the uncanny effect of the story can partly be ascribed to anxiety resulting from a castration complex.[56] Freud defines the uncanny as "that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."[57] He identifies that which gives rise to feelings of uncanniness in different objects, themes, situations, and experiences, both in real life and literature, often tracing them back to infantile sources. He then proposes a definition of the uncanny as "something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich—heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it."[58]

Among numerous sources of uncanniness in literature is a fetish that comes to life. A fetish works similar to a defense mechanism, helping overcome the anxiety of the castration complex. It is, after all, "a substitute for the woman's penis."[59]

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a critique of nostalgic nationalism. Nevertheless, this selective emphasis does not weaken the central argument concerning the allegorical interplay between nostalgia and fetishism. As noted above, the novel's portrayal of nostalgia blurs the boundaries between cultural, historical, and psychological registers.

[54] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 93.

[55] Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 13.

[56] Freud, "Uncanny," 217–56. Michael Beard offers an extensive comparison between Hoffmann's "The Sandman" and Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*, identifying an isomorphism between the two works. In his reading, "The Doll behind the Curtain" functions as a mediating text that clarifies some of the structural and thematic parallels. Beard explores Hoffmann's possible influence on Hedayat. At the same time, he reverses the comparative lens and rereads Hoffmann's narrative in light of its Iranian counterpart. He opens a critical dialogue with Freud's psychoanalytic reading of "The Sandman," suggesting that the text reintroduces intersexual relations as social constructions rather than purely biological phenomena. His parallel reading of "The Sandman" and *The Blind Owl* as "artist's parables" highlights the ways both texts foreground challenges of artistic representation, albeit differently. Beard, *Hedayat's Blind Owl*, 193–211.

[57] Freud, "Uncanny," 220.

[58] Ibid., 247.

[59] Freud, "Fetishism," 157.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> What happened, therefore, was that the boy refused to take cognizance of the fact of his having perceived that a woman does not possess a penis… . for if a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger; and against that there rose in rebellion the portion of his narcissism which nature has, as a precaution, attached to that particular organ. In later life a grown man may perhaps experience a similar panic when the cry goes up that Throne and Alter are in danger, and similar illogical consequences may ensue.[60]

This pathological process, explains Freud, fits well into the category of repression. The fetish becomes a substitute for the woman's phallus, allowing the child both to retain his belief that a woman has a phallus and to give it up. Fetishism is a mechanism of resolving a paradox and overcoming the anxiety of the castration complex.

The uncanny would be the revival of what has been repressed through fetishization. A text, therefore, may produce an uncanny feeling by a process of "defetishization," when, for instance, an inanimate object, a fetish indeed, comes back to life, pointing mercilessly to its repressed referent.[61]

Constructed dolls have the potential for causing an uncanny effect because of their ability to raise intellectual uncertainty over whether they are inanimate or alive, or if one is in reality or a fantasy.[62] Hedayat's short story presents this moment of doubt when the mannequin suddenly begins to walk. The equivalent scene in *The Blind Owl*, and the most pivotal uncanny moment of the whole narrative, is the narrator's encounter with the live version of the subject of his painting, viewed through the ventilation hole. This event is crucial not only because it triggers the narrator's psychological collapse, but also because it disrupts the narrative's equilibrium, marking a descent into chaos. In this moment, we witness the return of the repressed alongside a surge of anxiety.

Similar to the way in which the moving and laughing mannequin frightens Mehrdad, for the narrator of *The Blind Owl*, the effect of the ethereal woman coming out of his imaginary paintings is so huge that it shatters his entire being.[63] Once he sees them through the ventilation hole, the ethereal woman's eyes, so lavishly described, become the source of his misfortunes. He, simply put, cannot live without the eyes, but also cannot live with them. "So long as she lived, so long as her eyes overflowed with life, I had been tortured by the mere memory of her eyes."[64] Not surprisingly, his subsequent conduct should be to repress the waking anxiety by putting out the flame of life in the eyes and substituting them with another lifeless fetish.

The parallel murder of part 2, in which the ill writer kills "the harlot," raises the suspicion that what the artist/narrator does to the ethereal woman after she enters his chamber also may be an act of murder. There is even a warning hint just before the murder episode; the narrator, wandering around his house searching for any trace of the scene he witnessed

[60] Ibid., 153. Notice how, by the end of the quotation, Freud compares anxiety stemming from the castration complex to the anxiety of an adult man who feels that traditional institutions are under threat. *The Blind Owl* expands on a similar analogy, but it does so in a more artistic and intricate manner, while also reflecting on the peculiarities of its peripheral context.

[61] Jutta Emma Fortin has investigated fantasy as a literary genre that dramatizes the reverse of what can take place in psychological defense mechanisms. She argues that in literature of the fantastic "fetishism of all these sorts occur, as inanimate material objects are animated, aesthetically admired, sexually desired, and commercially exchanged." Fortin, *Method in Madness*, 30.

[62] "The Sandman" features such an animated doll, Olympia, with whom the protagonist, Nathaniel, falls in love. Freud interprets Olympia as "a dissociated complex of Nathaniel's which confronts him as a person," arguing that Nathaniel's obsessive and irrational love for her reflects his deep entrapment in this unresolved complex. Freud, "Uncanny," 232.

[63] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 18.

[64] Ibid., 38.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

through the ventilation hole, compares himself to "the murderer who returns to the scene of his crime."[65] He hosts his guest with a glass of the poisonous wine that he inherited from his father. He pours the wine between her locked teeth.

> Quite suddenly, for the first time in my life, a sensation of peace took possession of me. As I looked upon those closed eyes it was as though the demon which had been torturing me ... had fallen asleep for a while.[66]

The murder—whether judged intentional or not—clues us in to the unreliability of the narrator. His attempt to draw the eyes on paper adds another aspect to this unreliability. Omid Azadibougar has proposed that what the narrator alleges about capturing the expression of the eyes on paper is a "transcendental bluff." The narrator asserts having achieved the impossible. We can never trust whether or not the eyes that had been constantly evading him actually opened for a second after the woman's death. The impossibility, as Azadibougar argues, lies in the fact that the unsettling vitality of the eyes resists artistic representation altogether. No matter how technically accomplished, the artwork inevitably lacks what first inspired the desire to represent: life itself.[67]

This episode is central to the novel and will be revisited in the section immediately preceding the conclusion. The Kantian concept of the "sublime" can help deepen our understanding of the "transcendental bluff" at play. In Thomas Weiskel's account of the sublime, aesthetic transcendence begins with a rupture: a moment when representation fails and the mind confronts an object or sensation that exceeds comprehension. What follows is a semiotic crisis, when the subject must construct a new symbolic order to restore meaning. Yet, when this process of re-symbolization is aborted or displaced, the sublime collapses. Rather than culminating in transcendence, the subject becomes fixated on a substitute object—an image, fragment, or relic—that attempts to stand in for the unrepresentable whole. Such fetishistic substitution arrests symbolic movement and offers a false resolution to what remains an unresolved tension.[68] The narrator's effort to draw the eyes can be read as precisely such a failure. He attempts to convert the sublime excess of the woman's gaze—ungraspable and irreducibly alive—into a static, beautiful image. The act of representation becomes not a means of sublimation but a way of controlling, domesticating, and ultimately denying the vitality that first overwhelmed him.

The paradox is implicit in the narrator's contemplations. Initially, he says that "a painting, even though it be summary and unpretentious, must nevertheless produce an emotional effect and *possess a kind of life*."[69] However, at last, he realizes that to draw the eyes he doesn't need them to be open, because, in the end, he had never been "anything but a painter of the dead."[70]

Whereas true transcendence becomes possible by reorganizing a new symbolic order around an absence—what Lacan might call a constitutive "lack" or "void"—the insertion of a substitute object forecloses that process and halts sublimation. In Freudian terms, this substitution functions as a fetish: a compromise formation that disavows the traumatic recognition of the woman's anatomical "lack" (the absence of the phallus). The fetish object serves to stabilize the subject's desire and ward off castration anxiety, but it does so at the cost of symbolic reorganization. In this sense, the narrator's fixation on rendering the

[65] Ibid., 29.
[66] Ibid., 36.
[67] Azadibougar, *Persian Novel*.
[68] Weiskel, *Romantic Sublime*, 23–29.
[69] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 40. Emphasis mine.
[70] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

woman's eyes becomes a fetishistic maneuver—an attempt to neutralize the sublime rupture by replacing it with an image that falsely promises emotional resolution and symbolic mastery.

The narrator's failure becomes undeniably apparent to him after unveiling the antique vase he acquired when burying the woman with the help of a crooked old man. As soon as he sees the picture on the vase, he recognizes a quality that is missing from his own painting. Somehow, the antique jar retains the transcendental quality that is absent from his painting.

> It was impossible to tell the two apart, except that my picture was on paper while the painting on the vase was covered with an ancient transparent glaze which gave it a mysterious air, a strange, supernatural air. In the depths of the eyes burned a spark of the spirit of evil. No, the thing was past belief … Those eyes to which I had given burial there, by the hill, at the foot of the dead cypress tree …—those same eyes, brimful of vigorous life, were at that moment gazing at me."[71]

The narrator's attempt to re-fetishize his anthropomorphized fetish proves futile as soon as he finds the threatening and dreadful flame of the eyes on the antique jar. The episode reinforces the allegorical ties between the woman and the archaeologically discovered national heritage. It also adds a satirical element to the narrative, featuring a character who desperately campaigns to fulfill his wish but ultimately fails.

The master of fetishization

This brings us to a point when we can appreciate the psychological ground of the fantasy for the character. The narrator's fantastic dream is directed toward fulfilling the very same desire that the representational act fails to fulfill: to re-fetishize the animated fetish and push the repressed back to the unconscious. Through the dream, the narrator (now a writer living in the ancient city of Ray) gets to become the creator of the antique vase, who is indeed the master of fetishization.

In both parts, the narrator seeks this phenomenal ability to bestow life to inanimate, dead objects. In both parts, the object of desire maintains a transcendental quality associated, respectively, with the astonishing eyes of the ethereal woman and an innocent childhood memory in which he and his wife are playing hide-and-seek.

In both part 1 and part 2, "the reality" and "the fantasy," there is a turning point at which the transcendental object of desire seems accessible. There are various symmetries between the two parts that provide clues. In part 1, just before the woman's eyes open up for a moment, allowing the painter to "capture their expression," he uses a peculiar simile to describe the incident.

> All at once as I looked at her a flush began to appear upon her cheeks. They gradually were suffused with a crimson color like that of the meat that hangs in front of butchers' shops.[72]

In part 2, this exact simile is used after the narrator's wife enters his room, and she appears to him, for the first time, as "a comfortable, solid woman with a head full of commonplace, practical ideas—a genuine woman."[73] The narrator asks himself:

[71] Ibid., 55–56.
[72] Ibid., 41–42.
[73] Ibid., 127.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Was this the same graceful creature, was this the slim, ethereal girl who, in a black pleated dress, had played hide-and-seek with me on the bank of Suran, the unconstrained, childlike, frail girl whose ankles, appearing from under her skirt, had so excited me? Until this moment, when I had looked at her I had not seen her as she really was. Now it was as though a veil had fallen from my eyes. For some reason the thought of the sheep hanging by the door of the butcher's shop occurred to me. She had become for me the equivalent of the lump of butcher's meat.[74]

The last sentence, perhaps too vulgar and overt, is absent in part 1. But both episodes function as preludes to the violent episodes of actual butchering. Both are described as sudden revelations, "a falling of a veil," and what happens in both is that the narrator sees himself capable of getting hold of the "spirit" of a rotten, decomposing being. But what he actually does is substitute a fixed inanimate object or image for a living thing. The ill writer gets to separate the reality of his harlot wife from a nostalgic image associated with a childhood memory. He realizes that he can retain the childhood memory/fantasy of playing hide-and-seek with his former stepsister and current wife as an eternal image. The forgotten memory haunted the narrator only a night before, when he wandered near the bank of the river.

> The landscape before my eyes all at once struck me as familiar. I remembered that once in my childhood on the thirteenth day of Nouruz I had come here with my mother-in-law and "the bitch." That day we ran after each other and played for hours on the far side of these same cypress trees. Then we were joined by another band of children—who they were, I cannot quite remember. We played hide-and-seek together. Once when I was running after the bitch on the bank of the Suran her foot slipped and she fell into the water. The others pulled her out and took her behind the cypress tree to change her clothes. I followed them. They hung up a woman's veil as a screen in front of her but I furtively peeped from behind a tree and saw her whole body. She was smiling and biting the nail of the index-finger of her left hand. Then they wrapped her up in a white cloak and spread out her fine-textured black silk dress to dry in the sun.[75]

The passage is a fertile field for psychoanalytical interpretation, and it may be regarded as the narrator's trauma. Peeping from behind the tree, he sees for the first time a woman's genital organ and her lack of phallus, which in turn gives rise to his anxiety of castration. The narrator's fetishistic behavior, such as kissing his wife's brother (her substitute with a phallus) or stealing her nightdress and placing it between her legs, may be attributed to this repressed childhood memory. In Freudian psychoanalysis, this recollection and narrativization of the traumatic experience is considered a breakthrough in the therapy, taking a crucial step to reach closure. Upon the scene with "falling of the veil," another breakthrough step seems to take place as the narrator realizes the horrible truth: that his wife is no longer the fragile and innocent girl he had known. However, things take a different turn, and instead of achieving a sort of reconciliation with reality, he totally abandons it. He realizes that he can, self-consciously, love his memory (as another fetish) and let go of the unbearable reality:

> I understood now that I had become a miniature God. I had transcended the mean, paltry needs of mankind and felt within me the flux of eternity. What is eternity? To

[74] Ibid., 127–28.
[75] Ibid., 93.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> me eternity meant to play hide-and-seek with the bitch on the bank of the Suran, to shut my eyes for a single moment and hide my face in the skirt of her dress.[76]

Again, in Freudian terms, this is a point of departure from neurosis into psychosis. Underlying every fetish is a "divided attitude" of both disavowal and the affirmation of castration[77], a side-by-side presence of paradoxical ideas that women are castrated and that they are not. Freud proposes that "the essential difference between neurosis and psychosis [is] that in the former the ego, in service of reality, suppresses a piece of the id, whereas in a psychosis it lets itself be induced by the id to detach itself from a piece of reality."[78] In other words, whereas in subtle cases a fetish functions as a mediator between the real and the fantastic, in psychotic cases, the real gets supplanted by the fantastic. As a result of this revelation, the ill writer replaces the unpleasant reality of his harlot wife with a fetishistic nostalgia, surrendering himself fully to psychosis.

That the narrator compares himself to a "miniature god" is crucial for our understanding of his eventual transformation into the odds-and-ends man: A few pages before, he had described the odds-and-ends man as a "miniature god" that "with his squalid collection of wares" appeared as a sample or personification of the whole of creation. His collection of objects is what makes him special to the narrator.

> All the articles in his collection were dead, dirty and unserviceable. But what a stubborn life was in them and what significance there was in their forms! These dead objects left a far deeper imprint upon my mind than living people could ever have done.[79]

The glazed jar with the dirty handkerchief thrown over it is one of the few assortments on the old odds-and-end man's canvas sheet pointed out by the narrator. Soon after, we hear the nanny's explanation: "The old man was a potter in his younger days. After giving up that trade he kept only this one jar for himself and now he earns a living by peddling."[80] Once we recall that the jar possesses the transcendental quality missing from the artist/narrator's painting of the ethereal woman's eyes, we realize that the old man has a magical ability to bestow life upon inanimate objects. As soon as the ill writer acquires this ability, he is able to preserve a pleasant and desirable image of the past and let go of the mundane, polluted, and unbearable reality. This is yet another fetishistic behavior. Crucially, however, it is distinguished from the narrator's earlier fetishist behavior by being conscious and intentional.

His self-identification as a "miniature god" heralds the narrator's eventual transformation into the odds-and-ends man, but simultaneously into his dark double, the butcher. Throughout the novel, the narrator, who watches these two characters from the window, feels more and more sympathetic toward them. Of the two, the former has the ability to bestow life on dead objects, and the latter can treat real living creatures as dead meat. Unlike the narrator, they both are welcome in his wife's bed, and so he desires to resemble them. Not surprisingly, and because we are in a fantasy, he eventually gets to be not only like them but, literally, be them. He gets to retain the eternal and fixed memory of childhood as a transcendental essence and treat the actual living woman as dead meat. At the same time, he loses his former identity and becomes a new person.

[76] Ibid., 139.
[77] Freud, "Fetishism," 155.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 125.
[80] Ibid., 123.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The artist/narrator, who fails at his representational project and capturing the transcendental on paper, resorts to a fantasy. He projects his own story of failure onto a historical romance whose protagonist, unlike him, succeeds in supplanting the alluring but dreadful reality with a fixed, innocent, and harmless image. Interestingly enough, this dreadful reality, the ethereal woman, is the incarnation of the picture of a woman he had always painted. She is a fetish that has come to life. What we are facing, then, is a fantasy (the dream) within another fantasy (the novel itself) that takes a reverse process to turn an anthropomorphized fetish back into a lifeless object and soothe the anxiety of the ego (and the text). The ego strives to gain control, first with his representational project and then through a historical fantasy.

It is remarkable how *The Blind Owl* conjoins fetishism, nostalgia, and artistic representation through a complex net of analogies. On the one hand, within the fantasy itself, the ill writer's fetishist and nostalgic desires are analogized. His fetishist sexual behavior, prevalent across part 2, is parallelized to his indispensable nostalgic appeal to materialize the tenderness of a childhood memory and replace it for his polluted wife. On the other hand, parallels between parts 1 and 2 suggest that the artist/narrator's obsession with drawing the eyes is a desire of the same nature. Finally, the established association between the woman and a sort of cultural or national past amplifies the text's allegorical undertone, pointing to a dysfunctional relationship with that collective past.

Periphery, nostalgia, and the historical sublime

So far, I have approached *The Blind Owl* as a narrative driven by the character's desires, with the sequence of events shaping their fulfillment or frustration. This approach is particularly insightful when distinguishing the narrator as a fictional construct, enabling us to detect the irony that separates his perspective from the author's critical stance. Part of this irony directly emerges from the association of the ethereal woman with a lost collective past. Recognizing this connection highlights the role of the bent old man—the hearse driver who uncovers the antique vase and presents it to the narrator. "Dead bodies are my regular business," says the old man. "Grave digging's my trade. Not a bad trade, eh?"[81] Notably, a few pages earlier, the narrator has described his own trade associated with the dead: "I had never been anything else than a painter of dead bodies."[82]

The narrator's self-description as a painter of dead bodies establishes a link to a specific social type that emerged with the advent of Iranian modernity; the traditionalist scholars Hedayat critiques as the cultural custodians of a fossilized past. These scholars, devoted to preserving, editing, and celebrating ancient Persian texts, embodied a nostalgic relationship to history. In this final section, I argue that the narrator's repeated attempts to find symbolic substitutes for a threatening sublimity ironically reflect the predicaments of a peripheral culture striving to construct a modern identity by clinging to an idealized image of its past. In both cases, a similar dynamic of forgetting and remembrance is at work. I propose that *The Blind Owl* dramatizes a failure of the sublime. In its place, we encounter fetishistic substitutes that preserve the trauma of historical dislocation without enabling symbolic transformation. In this way, nostalgia becomes the degraded double of the sublime.

In a culture on the cusp of modernity, nostalgia functions much like a fetish within the individual's psyche. In the economy of ego, a fetish mediates between forgetting and remembrance of the trauma arising from witnessing the perceived "lack" in the female body. It enables repression of the trauma in the unconscious, but paradoxically commemorates it like a "trophy." Similarly, we can argue that fetishistic nostalgia enables forgetting

[81] Ibid., 52.
[82] Ibid., 41.

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through an act of commemoration. It helps the culture to step out of its traditional ways of life, but it does so with the assurance that its historical and cultural heritage is preserved. It relegates the sense of guilt and represses the anxiety of being detached from roots and origins. This process, however, represents a compromise formation rather than a genuine, transformative sublimation, as the underlying trauma is merely masked, not integrated.

F. R. Ankersmit points out that transitioning into a new world always requires "forgetting a previous world and shedding a former identity."[83] This separation from one's former self is traumatic by nature, marked by "a feeling of profound and irreparable loss, of cultural despair, and of hopeless disorientation."[84] Being forced into modern ways of life stimulates a sense of detachment from one's former identity and being separated from one's natural habitat. In *The Blind Owl*, the grotesque description of houses evokes a sense of annihilation in the new urban environment:

> Houses shaped like pyramids, cubes and prisms, with low, dark windows without panes. The windows were like the wild eyes of a man in a state of delirium. The walls of the houses appeared to possess the property of instilling intense cold into the heart of the passerby.[85]

Ankersmit emphasizes that although the content of this trauma is the loss of a past identity, it is paradoxically remembered as well—its absence becomes an integral part of shaping the new identity.

> In this way we can say that our collective identity largely is the sum of all the scars on our collective soul, scars that were occasioned by our forced abandonment of former identities, scars that will never wholly fade and that will cause in us a continuous and enduring pain.[86]

The desire to reconcile with "a past that resists reunification"—a past from which we have been "ejected, expelled, or exiled"—is as unattainable as reunification with a former self. The past remains a transcendental object of desire, like the woman's eyes, which evade truly noticing the narrator.

> One glance from her would have been sufficient to make plain all the problems of philosophy and the riddles of theology. One glance from her and mysteries and secrets would no longer have existed for me.[87]

> The radiance of her eyes, her complexion, her perfume, her movements, all appeared familiar to me, as though, in some previous existence in the world of dreams, my soul

[83] Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*. As outlined in the introductory section, Ankersmit mobilizes a wide array of psychoanalytic concepts to articulate his theory of historical rupture. This offers a reverse analogy to the novel's allegorical logic, in which private trauma is projected onto collective experience, making Ankersmit's framework particularly apt for unpacking *The Blind Owl*'s complex allegorical apparatus. What follows, then, is not so much a reading of the novel through a theoretical lens, but rather a parallel reading of two texts that illuminate one another.

[84] Ibid., 324.

[85] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 46–47.

[86] Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 325. This brings to the mind the opening and most famous line of *The Blind Owl*: "There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude like a kind of canker" (Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 17).

[87] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 31.

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> had lived side by side with her, had sprung from the same root and the same stock and it was inevitable that we should be brought together again.[88]

This yearning for unity is repeatedly thwarted in the novel, emphasized through metaphors of separation. The stream dividing the bent old man from the ethereal woman, the hollow "grating" and "sinister" laughter of the old man, and the woman's gaze—always evasive—underscore the impossibility of reunion.

Ankersmit argues that, because reunion with the past is impossible, the desire for reunion is transformed into a desire to "know" the past. History becomes an object of knowledge and research, permanently separated from the lived reality of the historian. However, historical knowledge only intensifies the sense of loss, for it foregrounds the gap between the present and the past. The desire for being is continuously betrayed by its substitute—the desire for knowledge.[89] For a civilization on the verge of identity transformation, an already transformed society wherein the past lingers as "a mere empty shell," the desire for knowing functions as a double-edged sword. Although rooted in a desire to retrieve a lost world, it cuts loose all the strings that have bound the self to that hollow shell, allowing a final passage to the new world and the birth of a new identity.

We may extend Ankersmit's argument and propose that, in a peripheral culture, a nostalgic interrogation of the past aims to function similarly, to achieve two seemingly paradoxical desires. On the one hand, it serves to mitigate the sense of detachment from the premodern ways of life; on the other, it bears a subtle intention to achieve a total separation from that identity to align with modernity.

In societies undergoing belated modernization, forgetting and remembrance take on a particularly complex dynamic. Older traditions and social forms often persist alongside emerging modern institutions and relationships in these cultural contexts. For the pro-modernization elite, this uneven development engenders a profound frustration, stemming from their inability to fulfill the modernization project and "catch up" with the advanced center. It often feels as though the present and past coexist uneasily, with the past lingering, imposing its weight on the contemporary individual, or haunting them like a wandering phantom. This intricate relationship with the past is allegorically explored in *The Blind Owl*, first in the description of the narrator's house: Built atop the ruins of the ancient city, "by a madman or ill-disposed architect," the narrator can see every little corner of it with his closed eyes and feel its pressure on his shoulder.[90]

Modernism reflects a deep ambivalence toward the past, perceived both as an object of longing and a source of menace, much like the ethereal woman's eyes are perceived by our hapless artist. For him, to draw the eyes on paper means a symbolic reunion, but simultaneously a license for abandonment. The painting aims to reconcile a presence and an absence. It should allow the narrator to bury the woman while convincing him that the "essence" of her existence is preserved. This act of symbolic substitution is meant to serve as a mechanism for both forgetting and remembrance, offering the narrator a way to mitigate his sense of guilt. Throughout this part, relief and guilt remain interwoven. When the woman closes her eyes in his chamber, a sensation of peace takes possession of the narrator.[91] But soon after, he realizes that he must spend "a long, dark, cold endless night in the company of a corpse."

[88] Ibid., 28.
[89] Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 329.
[90] Hedayat, Blind Owl, 22.
[91] Ibid., 36.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> I felt that ever since the world had been the world, so long as I had lived, a corpse, cold, inanimate and still, had been with me in a dark room.[92]

There is always a trade-off between two unbearable burdens: the oppressive presence of the ethereal woman and the guilt arising from her absence (the narrator's murder). Ultimately, the narrative becomes a satire of his repeated failures to reconcile these contradictory desires—to remember and to forget.

Ankersmit argues that for the past to be truly abandoned, it must first be fully presented to the self. Drawing on Hayden White, he likens the deaths of civilizations to acts of suicide, formulating it as "the association of dissociation." In this process, the self should first integrate the lost part—through storytelling or historical writing—before dissociating it and transgressing it as the lost part of a former identity. It is a remembrance for the sake of forgetting.

This is where the concept of "sublime" comes in. For Ankersmit, the sublime would be the final, crucial step for fulfilling a complete transformation. It does not reside somewhere beyond the historical text but is a constituent part of the subject/historian's experience at the moment of historical transformation. There are significant resemblances between trauma and the sublime; they both involve dissociation, depersonalization, and numbing confrontation with overwhelming experience.

> Sublime experience is then the kind of experience inviting or necessitating us to discard or to dissociate a former self from the self we are, after having had the sublime experience in question. Sublime experience is then the kind of experience forcing us to abandon the position in which we coincide with ourselves and to exchange this for a position where we relate to ourselves in the most literal sense of the word, hence, as if we were *two* persons instead of just one.[93]

Sublime experience makes "the birth of a new self" possible, when we get to observe our former self (the self we left behind as a result of the sublime experience) from the "perspective of an outsider"; as if we are "both inside and outside the world" we are observing.[94] It then involves a "quasi-mythical" sense of union with the world; "a fusion of the world and the self."[95]

Despite their differences, the notion of the sublime outlined above shares close affinities with Weiskel's formulation, introduced in an earlier section. While Weiskel analyzes the sublime as a semiotic and psychological phenomenon, emphasizing the breakdown and reconstruction of meaning within aesthetic experience, Ankersmit relocates the concept to the historical and collective domain to describe moments of identity rupture and transformation at the level of culture or civilization. Nevertheless, in both frameworks, the sublime hinges on the subject's capacity to reorganize symbolic meaning following a traumatic or disruptive rupture—whether through aesthetic imagination (Weiskel) or historical realignment (Ankersmit). In approaching *The Blind Owl*, this article locates its analysis precisely at the intersecting boundaries of these two theories, as the subject here is at once psychological and cultural. The narrator is a politicized subject in a Jamesonian sense: one driven by both libidinal and cultural forces, in whom personal experience is saturated with collective

[92] Ibid., 38.

[93] Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 347. From this definition, we can deduce that sublime experience also has a remarkable affinity with the uncanny, in the sense that its horror comes from the revocation of something "old and familiar," in this case, a former self.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and historical meaning. His failure, likewise, is both a collapse of symbolic reorientation and a misfire of historical transformation.

Throughout *The Blind Owl*, we encounter several moments that initially exhibit the qualities of a sublime experience. However, the narrator's longing for transcendence repeatedly gives way to fetishistic substitution rather than sublime renewal. One such instance occurs when the narrator begins to paint the ethereal woman's eyes. Alone in his chamber, with her corpse laid before him, he describes sensations that at first retain the hallmarks of sublimity.

> At that moment my thoughts were numbed. Within me I felt a new and singular form of life. My being was somehow connected with that of all the creatures that existed about me, with all the shadows that quivered around me. I was in intimate, inviolable communication with the outside world and with all created things, and a complex system of invisible conductors transmitted the restless flow of impulses between me and all the elements of nature. There was no conception, no notion which I felt to be foreign to me. I was capable of penetrating with ease to the secrets of the painters of the past, the mysteries of abstruse philosophers, the ancient folly of ideas and species. At that moment I participated in the revolutions of earth and heaven, in the germination of plants and in the instinctive movements of animals. Past and future, far and near had joined together and fused in the life of my mind.[96]

Shortly after, the narrator gathers candles, paper, and other tools to portray "this form which was doomed slowly and gradually to suffer decomposition and disintegration."[97] As long as the representational project is incomplete, the subject of the painting retains its transcendental quality: "In the flickering candlelight her face was still more tranquil than before; in the half-dark of the room it wore an expression of mystery and immediacy."[98] Only with the accomplishment of this goal (at least to the artist's eye) comes the true realization of death (detecting the smell of decomposition, noticing the maggots and the pair of blister-flies).

A parallel process unforlds through the narrator's historical fantasy, in which he encounters a millennium-old decomposing identity. The new world he enters is, in fact, the old world that he has lost. It feels "perfectly familiar and near" as it is his "home," his "natural surroundings." The journey into history, mediated by the antique vase, should result in the birth of a new self. As a sublime experience, his confrontation with his decomposing former self should mark the transition to the new identity—but it ultimately fails. Waking up from the dream, he sees the bent old man running away with the vase, while he himself has become a decaying corpse, still bearing the weight of the woman's body on his chest.

Just like the episode with painting the eyes, the fantasy, initially showing the promising signs of a sublime experience, crumbles to dust. What appears to be a sublime turning point in the narrative is, in fact, a compulsive return to fetishistic displacement. The narrator stages a moment of supposed transformation, but this performance merely masks his enduring entanglement with the past and his failure to reckon with its unresolved burdens. Marked by two blister-flies and a tiny little worm on a decomposing corpse, he again retreats into fetishistic fixations. These fixations function as degraded versions of the sublime—artificial constructs that substitute true transcendence with a comforting illusion of control. The narrator never reaches transcendence but loops endlessly through unresolved repetition. Through his nostalgic and fetishistic engagements with the

[96] Hedayat, *Blind Owl*, 39.
[97] Ibid., 40.
[98] Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

past, the narrator's journey underscores, once again, his inability to reconcile with the overwhelming realities of historical and personal trauma.

As much as our reading of *The Blind Owl* suggests, for a peripheral culture, a genuine sublime experience, as theorized by Ankersmit, is inherently difficult, if not impossible. In Ankersmit's formulation, the sublime marks the final rupture with the past: a moment of historical transformation in which a collective subject sheds its former identity and assumes a new one. In this model, the past survives only as a hollow shell, a residual trace emptied of symbolic vitality. The sublime signals the full consummation of a modern identity—an emergence through trauma into a new symbolic order. However, in peripheral societies, in which modernity is unevenly experienced and incompletely internalized, this clean rupture rarely materializes. The cultural logic of the periphery is defined by the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, where multiple historical layers coexist in tension, with older forms persisting within the very structures meant to replace them. In such a context, identity does not transform; it fractures.

This is the case in *The Blind Owl*, where what we encounter is not a subject caught in the sublime reorganization of meaning, but a self torn between two irreconcilable temporalities. The narrator inhabits a "schizochronic" condition. The uncanny repetition of the crooked old man—whose presence thwarts every attempt at transcendence, whose laughter dissolves every fantasy of reunion—embodies this failure. In *The Blind Owl*, identity is not forged but splintered. Rather than achieving the sublime fulfillment of historical transformation, the narrator remains trapped in the cycle of a failed sublimation: unable to discard the past as a mere shell, yet incapable of reanimating it as a living symbolic order.

To capture the essence of the woman's eyes on paper; to preserve the memory of a lost innocence in the childhood game of hide-and-seek; to glimpse the life of a "partner in sorrow" from a millennium ago: the narrator's efforts all involve a fetishistic nostalgia for a more innocent and more natural past. Unlike the ill writer in the historical fantasy who fully immerses himself in the past and abandons the present, the contemporary artist/narrator fails to find resolution. Reuniting with the past remains impossible, but so does its proper burial. Even after burying the suitcase in a trench, the narrator opens the lid to find "amid a mass of coagulated blood and swarming maggots, two great black eyes gazing fixedly at [him] with no trace of expression [in] them."[99] These haunting eyes reappear in his chamber, replicated on the antique vase with the same devastating power. The predicament is more complex than what Ankersmit's framework allows; the narrator is trapped not only by the impossibility of reunification with a lost paradise but also by his inability to escape the hollow shell of its persistent presence.

The dichotomy of presence and absence fails to fully capture the narrator's predicament, as the past is both irretrievably lost and uncannily persistent, like a ghost. The closest allegorical picture is perhaps that of the ethereal woman whose "presence" simultaneously manifests the impossibility of reunification.

The paradoxical desire to forget (to dissociate from or destroy) and to remember (to commemorate or fetishize) is characteristic of every culture caught between traditional identities and the demands of modernity. In the absence of a genuine sublime experience or the ability to fully detach from a former self and establish a new symbolic order, fetishistic nostalgia acts as a degraded sublime, permitting an imagined return to the past for objective contemplation. In this context, fetishistic nostalgia serves two goals. First, it affirms the "present-ness" or modern-ness of the culture by objectifying the past and creating a clear divide between traditional and contemporary identity. Second, it acts as a mechanism of forgetting, mitigating the guilt of abandoning that past by promising to preserve it in cultural heritage. The narrator of *The Blind Owl* repeatedly resorts to such fetishes, hypocritically commemorating things he deeply wishes to forget. For Hedayat, however, this

[99] Ibid., 50.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

strategy is doomed to fail. The narrator's reliance on fetishes leaves him degraded, torn between a rotting carcass and a hollow shell, animated by and fleeing with the fetish—a grotesque parody of rebirth that satirizes the illusion that a new identity can emerge through nostalgic attachment to a glorified cultural past.

Concluding remarks

In this article, I have examined how *The Blind Owl* superimposes biographical and cultural pasts and depicts sexual fetishism and nostalgia as analogous symptoms of a toxic relationship with one's infantile and cultural histories. Through a comparison with Hedayat's earlier short story, "The Doll behind the Curtain," I explored how Hedayat employs the dynamics of sexuality in an allegorical form to offer an ironic critique of the cultural predicaments faced by a traditional society encountering modernity. This comparison revealed a recurring narrative strategy: the animation of fetishes that evoke anxiety over the return of the repressed.

A close psychoanalytic reading of the parallels between parts 1 and 2 of *The Blind Owl* demonstrates that the narrator's actions following the unexpected visit of the ethereal woman, and even his fantastic dream, involve displacing his anthropomorphized complexes onto new fetishes while preserving their essence in symbolic forms. Within the narrative's underlying grid of analogies, which intertwines fetishism and nostalgia, this paradoxical desire reflects a dual impulse to remember and forget the past simultaneously.

In the final section, I borrowed Frank Ankersmit's theoretical framework to examine the contradictory processes of remembrance and forgetting within the historical transition of a culture toward a new identity. This transition, as Ankersmit theorized, is enabled by a sublime historical experience—a fleeting moment where former and new identities coincide, marking both a dissociation from the past and an association with the emerging present. The central irony of *The Blind Owl*, I argued, stems from the narrator's obsession with staging transformative sublime experiences that inevitably regress into fetishistic loops. In this way, the novel portrays a culture caught between mourning the loss of its traditional identity and yearning for modernity. It interrogates the role of nostalgia in these struggles, depicting it as a mechanism that traps the subject in a cycle of unresolved longings.

In the introductory section, I invoked the concept of national allegory within Fredric Jameson's theory of modernity, suggesting that *The Blind Owl* exemplifies a modernist novel that allegorizes cultural entanglement in the periphery. The narrator's repeated failure to achieve resolution becomes emblematic of the cultural and psychological tensions of living in a fragmented historical context, where past and present coexist uneasily—the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.

This article contributes not by offering a definitive interpretation, but by demonstrating how allegory, far from being rigid or totalizing, becomes a dynamic structure, capable of mediating between private subjectivity and historical trauma. In doing so, it offers a vivid example of what Jameson perceived as "a radically different and objective relationship of politics to libidinal dynamics."[100] From this perspective, *The Blind Owl* shows how stories centered on individual psychology often take on wider meaning in peripheral cultures. They become sites where personal and collective histories intersect—where inner conflicts reflect unresolved cultural struggles. The symbolic forms that emerge from this overlap are often strange, intense, and fragmented because they carry the weight of multiple, conflicting temporalities. In such a setting, even the most intimate experiences—grief, guilt, desire—become ways of grappling with uneven modernity.

[100] Jameson, "Third-World Literature," 80.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Acknowledgements. This article is based on my PhD dissertation, which explores the contemporary Persian novel and its engagement with history. I would like to thank my supervisors, Forogh Hashabeiky, Joakim Wrethed, and Hashem Ahmadzadeh for their invaluable guidance and support. I also extend my gratitude to Omid Azadibougar for his insightful comments and feedback on earlier drafts of this work. Special thanks to Michael Beard, whose suggestions at the earlier stages of this project provided direction for my reading and thought. I acknowledge the use of OpenAI's ChatGPT for language editing and stylistic refinement. All AI-generated suggestions were carefully reviewed, validated, and integrated into the final manuscript to ensure scholarly accuracy and relevance.

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Cite this article: Rahmani Ghanavizbaf, A. "Historical Fantasy: exploring the Spectrums of Fetishism and Nostalgia in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*." *Iranian Studies* (2025): 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.10090