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Aspects of Historical Consciousness Through the Fabric of Akhavan Sales's Poetry

“Poetry is the impatience of the human existence at times of which the divine light of prophecy has been shed upon it”¹, commented the late *Mehdi Akhavan Sales* in one of his interviews when asked about his conception of poetry. In his description he notes the importance of the poet within a civilized society by elaborating that an element of impatience² must be present in their writing when he or she encounters an almost transcendental influence to write. He assumes that the poet would be committed to a prophetic mission- one with the power to act as a messenger to cascade information and promote specific ideals to the society. This would suggest that the poet is among a selected few crowd and has important responsibilities. However, we must be clear that Akhavan is not referring to prophecy as one with sanctimonious qualities and relating to the divine. Rather, he emphasizes that any real poet would have a message to convey based on their life experience which is acquired through wisdom and on that merit alone their works should be evaluated. Now, as to what this prophetic responsibility would exactly entail, we shall come back to later with our discussion of Hegel, but it does suffice to state that it is manifested in some form of historical consciousness. Akhavan's outlook in particular, seems to appeal to the dramaturgical approach towards society by seeing people as the main theatrical performers and them projecting an on screen image of themselves in order to communicate with others. At the same time, Akhavan recognizes that not everyone is committed to express their impatience and may instead take the path of contemplation by remaining quiet and perceptive, or that some are not comfortable sharing that sense of impatience with others- some may even not deem others worthy of sharing their impatience.

It logically follows to ask why and how Akhavan himself composes poetry. And the answer to those questions would be quite difficult to obtain. Namely, because the man is unable to give a decisive reason as to why he writes other than to satisfy his inner urge to express himself and depict miniatures of societal events on the paper. But on a less mechanistic note, Akhavan does acknowledge that he writes poetry as an experiment- conducted, designed and tested- by and for himself to assess whether he is dead or alive.³ Life is one of the most important driving fuels for Akhavan's writings because he sees life as a collection of conditions which allow for human growth and connectivity.

Therefore, Akhavan cannot remain silent and apathetic towards historical events that have permeated the Iranian society in its entirety. Iran is a rich country with many natural resources as abundant as the evergreen province of Mazandaran, as deep as the Persian Gulf and its islands and as heroic and adamant as Damavand Mountains- let alone the oil reserves. Yet, in such a case, Akhavan sees that these resources have not been able to fully self-actualize the societal

¹ Live Farsi interview text translated from “Sometimes I have thought...” Akhar-e Shahnamah, Tehran, 1338/1959, pp 128-129.

² Impatience is roughly translated as (تلاطم) which is the eagerness of the poet to convey their thoughts and their inability to cope if they are impeded from their active participation.

³ Ibid. pp- 135.

needs for a life pronounced with freedom and many problems remain unsolved. It is in this vision that Akhavan has no other choice but to break his silence in order to address these concerns and to be conscious of them.

A short background about the author would be appropriate: Mehdi Akhavan Sales was born in 1928 in the province of Mashhad but moved to Tehran in 1948.⁴ As a young man, he devoted himself to a career in teaching in Varamin but also took part in various political activities in the early 1950s which lead to his arrest and imprisonment after the coup d'état of 1953.⁵ His poem *Winter* is particularly popular to demonstrate the political tension and the fear present in the society and will be used as an exemplar of what historical consciousness meant to the author which I shall particularly pay attention to during my presentation. Akhavan's political activism in the early years of his life is in direct contrast with the way Akhavan lived the rest of his life: simple, modest, away from controversies and without the presence of any form of luxuries but still led a very rich life in the pursuit of his ideals. Akhavan died in 1990 in Tehran. He left behind a heritage filled with modern poetry, social critiques, romantic poetry.⁶ In addition, he was also able to bridge a gap between the past intellectual thinkers and Zoroastrian religion of Iran by his allusions to the works of Ferdowsi's magnum opus *Shahnamah* (The Book of Kings), reflection on Zoroaster and the importance of embracing the monotheistic god of Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda. In one particular poem, *Akhar-e-Shahnamah*, he capitalizes on the sense of primitivism- the longing to go back to one's historical roots and he is able to set the tone by his mastery of dissonance, repetition to depict a kind of restraint standing for civilization as he depicts a caravan of people trying to find their path in the mountain.

On that note, my original research interest for pursuing the poetry of Akhavan Sales is as follows: First, little is known about Akhavan Sales's works in the West. Even though when one reads only a few collections of his works, it becomes apparent that his conceptions are not limited to the geographical borders of Iran alone but go vastly beyond. This raises the question of why, then, have there not been enough scholarship and studies strictly dedicated to Akhavan's works? Is it because of the hardships of translating from one language into another that takes from its essence? Or is it just impossible to contain the purity and simplicity of his works when converting it into a different mental framework in English? Or is due to the orientalist interpretations and bias that comes from a Westerner reading the works of an Iranian poet? I hope to answer these questions in my honours thesis by taking a closer look into the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Analytic tradition. I intend to take a very close look into his posthumously published work: *Philosophical Investigations* where he expresses that we have often confused ourselves by associating that there are preconceived boundaries as to what the

⁴ Ghorbani, A., *An Annotated Contemporary Persian Poetry*, Maaz Publiser, 2001.

⁵ 1953 coun d'état (28 Mordad/ مرداد ۲۸، کونداي ۲۸) lead to the overthrow of Iran's Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and returned the power to Mohammad Reza Pahlavi only to strengthen his reign.

⁶ Ibid.

meaning of a word may be. Instead, he proposes the tool theory by saying that a meaning of a word is determined by how often it is used and in the context it is used which is, in contrast to his early work described as the picture theory in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.⁷ Second, because Akhavan's poetry is deeply rooted in our age because it is historically conscious- it is one where sees itself committed to discussing the struggles of modernity, impulses, fears and hopes, and most importantly the aspects of time and presence of it as if they were a Wagnerian leitmotif that has been crafted all throughout his works.

So, then, what are my main research topics for this thesis project? Well, the first research question I would like to investigate is the idea of time and presence as it can be best explained in the form of historical consciousness. Namely, what form is historical consciousness manifested in? Why is this question important? Why should we care about it? The second question I raise is what form of development does historical consciousness assume? In other words, is it characterized by a linear progression, revolutionary, or one marked by abrupt changes? After three months of reading and thinking, I am still unable to answer this question to the merit it deserves, but hope to have to have an answer upon the culmination of my work.

Speaking of historical consciousness, what exactly is it?

To answer that question, we must go back to 1780's where the school of German Idealism rose to prominence and particularly to one man: Hegel.⁸ As Frederick Beiser puts it, Hegel was a philosopher that emphasized history in his works and loved it so much that he gave many lectures on the same topic in Berlin which helped him become recognized as a true historicist who engrained spirit (known as Geist in German) in the medium of history and through reason was able to track its development.⁹ Now, we need to be also aware that just because of Hegel's current sphere of influence among scholars as the best representative of the Absolute Idealists, any claim that puts him as the progenitor of this philosophy would be considered inappropriate because the essential ideas were conveyed much earlier by Schlegel, Novalis, Zwingli among others. It must be clarified that Hegel's role was to "systematize ideas already been formulated by his contemporaries."¹⁰

So then, how exactly would it be possible to defend the idea that historical consciousness, to the magnitude that Hegel describes it- that humanity has a history, there is an organic base for

⁷ Wittgenstein, L. *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*.

⁸ German Idealism was a school of thought that rose to prominence with the works of many noted philosophers including Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel who shared a deep responsibility to idealism. Among their contribution was to systematize philosophy into one single absolute and Kant's transcendental idealism must receive much attention for this. Kant believed that a set of small interdependent principles were able to govern much of metaphysics, logic and epistemology. Hegel, on the other hand was more radical in his perception of a single absolute and it is this idea that he goes on to present as Geist in his phenomenology of spirit which will be relevant to this discussion.

⁹ Beiser, F. *Hegel* (Routledge Philosophy Series), 2003.

¹⁰ German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism 1781-1801, Frederick Beiser, pp.350.

society, and that human beliefs are derived from historical necessities- would be present in the poetry of someone who lived two centuries later in a completely different environment? This can be accomplished by literature analysis that amalgamates theories in philosophy, in this case much of Hegel's perception of history, and interprets Persian literature, poetry in particular, through that lens. Upon reading his works we would know that Akhavan's works contain space-time medium where human existence is seen through the past, the present and the future. However, without past memories there is no history and Akhavan's helps raise consciousness of events experienced by a collective.

There are many more questions that need to be investigated. My future direction with the research would require me to look into how historical consciousness illicit collective memory during the time frame of which Akhavan composed his poetries and whether an argument can be made of the case that this collective memory would be pronounced in *res gestae* (the things that happened) and *historica return gestarum* (the narration of things that happened) within Iran's society. ¹¹ Recognizing that this research has been in its early stages of development and requires more mental sketches and mapping to be applied in the continuing semesters of Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, I would like to conclude by acknowledging that this research would have not been possible without the mentorship and support of Professor Wali Ahmadi, whom I admire very dearly, and the St. Anselm Foundation for giving me this great honor to contribute although very little, to the research that is conducted at this university.

Let us end with an excerpt from Akhavan's poem Zemestan(Winter):

I am neither white nor black: I am colorless.

Come and open the door, see how cheerless I am.

O, my dear host, your nightly guest is shivering outside.

There is no hail outside, no death; If you hear any sound, it is the sound of cold and teeth.

I have come tonight to pay up my loan.

I have come tonight to leave my debt beside my mug.

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¹¹ Funkenstein, A. (1989). Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness. *History and Memory*, 1(1), 5-26. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25618571>

- Zemestan, Tehran, 1335/1956
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- Akhar-e Shahnamah, Tehran, 1338/1959

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