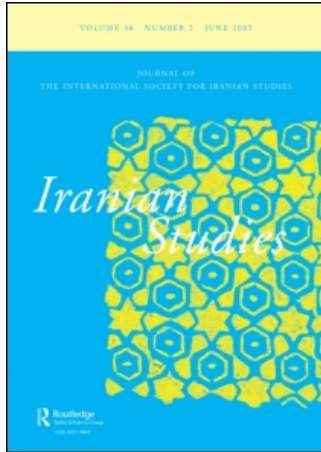


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Text and the Body in a Poem by Simin Behbahani

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Mahdi Tourage

Text and the Body in a Poem by Simin Behbahani

This paper is a phenomenological study of one of Simin Bebbahani's better known poems, "Raqqaseh," which is about the nightly ritualized dance of a dancing girl in a tavern. It will argue that the tavern in this poem could be viewed as a cultural container for socially dangerous representations and impulses, like the metaphoric sexualized body of the dancing girl. The tavern could also be viewed as a semiotic register for the symbolic representation of the dominant normative social discourse. By viewing the dance as performance, the communicative association of the symbolic significance of the dancing girl's body and the tavern and its audience will also be discussed. This paper will argue that the reader too is implicated in the performative function of the text.

This paper is a textual analysis of one of Simin Behbahani's better known poems, "Raqqaseh," which is about the nightly dance of a dancing girl in a tavern.¹ This poem is the product of a particular time and place. The itinerary of its narrative could be mapped onto the shifting cultural patterns of Iranian society and literary trends in contemporary Iranian history. We may even link the conceptual thrust of this poem to some of the author's biographical notes. However, by doing so, we may be foreclosing the multiple levels of meaning that exists in this poem. Like any great literary work, this poem is in conversation with its cultural matrix, yet its significance exceeds its cultural matrix and historical context. As Jacques Derrida reminds us: "No context can determine meaning to the point of exhaustiveness."² This paper is concerned with the historicity of this poem insofar as this historicity is epistemically constituted within the poem. Hence, this is a phenomenological study that reverses the relation of inner and outer, taking not the external events but the text of this poem as constitutive of meanings. Instead of deriving the meaning of the poem from its external features (for example, from its historical context), it is the external features that are viewed as derivative. This is not to disregard the intentionality of the author—as if she is irrelevant or did not know what she was writing. Rather, insofar as hermeneutics

Mahdi Tourage is Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion and Islam, Colgate University, New York. I would like to humbly dedicate this paper to Simin Behbahani, who is best described in Farzaneh Milani's words as: "A Poet who 'Never Sold Her Pen or Soul.'" See Nora Boustani's review of Farzaneh Milani and Kaveh Safa, eds. and trans., *A Cup of Sin: Selected Poems, Simin Bebbahani* (Syracuse, 1999), in *The Washington Post*, 10 June, 2006, A16. I would like to especially thank Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi for his insightful comments and constant support and encouragement over the years.

¹Simin Behbahani, *Majmu'a-yi 'Ash'ar* (Tehran, 1384 AH/2006 CE), 56–59. The line numbers are noted in the text of this paper in parentheses. All translations are mine.

²Jacques Derrida, *Apporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA, 1993), 9.

as a praxis of interpretation is envisioned as a sustained open process of meaning production, the latent authorial intent is differentially reproduced in every act of *reading* this poem.

I will begin with a summary of the poem and argue that the tavern is a symbolic space of “abjection,” populated by those who are displaced through the regulatory operations of the dominant discourse. With the symbolic significance of the highly sexualized body of the dancing girl staged in the text, the tavern may be conceptualized as an erogenous register. In this context, the communicative association of the symbolic significance of the dancer’s sexualized body and the tavern will also be discussed. The process of the cultural production of norms and conventions and the function of the precluded object will be explored by examining the girl’s ritualized dance as “performance.” This paper will argue that the reader too is implicated in the performative function of the text in ways that the semiotically constructed nature of the reader’s subjective self is opened to self-examination.

The Poem

This poem begins with the description of a tavern in which a dancing girl is engaged in a seductive dance performance. The drunkards of the tavern cry out with desire as she tosses her golden hair and her pleated skirt. The sounds of music and the hitting of the glasses mix with shouts and laughter as she twists and turns her soft body (7), the curve of her hips winding like a famished snake (13), the flaunting of her naked ivory breast (10). The dance comes to an end and the drunkards clap their hands and ecstatically tear their clothes, throwing flowers on her head.

This is apparently a nightly routine, as we are informed that unlike the previous nights, the dancing girl did not become happy, and was not laughing (21–22). She became quite upset. She has been drinking, as we are told—a form of self-medication, perhaps, that makes the night more bearable for her. But her intoxication is colored with pain and bitter sorrow (25–26). The wine does not calm her; in fact, it increases her regret for a life that is devoid of joy (27–28). All her life, she has given happiness to others, yet she has never been happy herself (29–30). All her life, she has given others pleasure, but she has never tasted it herself (31–32). She muses that she must exact revenge on these tyrants (37). But the audience dismisses her outrage, saying she is drunk, and, after a moment of silence, the laughter of the audience continues.

The Tavern as the Space of Abjection

Persian culture bears the magnanimous weight of an ambivalently glorified past. Modern Persian poetry, too, often defines itself in relation to a highly refined and sophisticated past. Many elements of classical Persian poetry are prominent in this

poem, for example, *may* (wine), *maykhanab* (tavern), *masty* (drunkenness), and *kharabatian* (lit. “tavern-dwellers,” here translated as “drunkards”). However, in what could be called “reterritorialization,” some of these established conventions of classical times are deployed in a different sense.³ For example, the *kharabatian* are (actual) drunkards in a tavern, not some mystics intoxicated with the allegorical wine of love. This recirculation of the tropes of classical Persian (mystical) literature is a reinscription of their textuality. In the context of this poem, the tavern (much like its classical counterpart) is on the fringes of the normative social discourse. It could be argued that the tavern is a cultural container for those representations and impulses that are deemed socially dangerous. Borrowing from the feminist psychoanalyst/philosopher, Julia Kristeva, we may call the tavern the space of “abjection.”⁴ Kristeva defines abjection as the state of marginalized groups: “One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it. Violently and painfully. A passion.”⁵ The space of abjection is the locus inhibited by abjected things or beings that are excluded from the dominant group.

Mary Douglas, in her classic study *Purity and Danger*, writes: “The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system.”⁶ In this sociological sense, the tavern is analogous to the margins and weak spots of the social body. With all the sexualized descriptions of the dancing girl’s body, we have in effect an interaction of social and physical bodies. The tavern thus re-enacts that which the regulatory discourse of the social body has marginalized. Accordingly, the seductive performance of the dancing girl is not an isolated event. The text informs us that, like a rite, the dance rehearses a ritualized event that is repeated every night. It is a nightly event with a high degree of formality and fixity, hence, the surprise and disbelief of the audience at its interruption. In regard to commemorative ceremonies, Paul Connerton remarks: “Rites are said to be the systematically indirect statement, encoded in the symbolism of the rite, of conflicts which that rite disguises and to that extent denies.”⁷ The symbolism of the tavern and the dance correspond to a primary social process familiar to the audience of the tavern. More importantly, as Connerton’s insight suggests, the ritualized dance of the dancing girl disguises and denies a conflict. What is this conflict that the dance disguises and denies? To answer this question, we must look for clues provided in the text of the poem.

Beginning with line 21, there is a tension introduced into the textual flow of the poem where the dancing girl is described as neither happy nor coquettish. This discernible tension in the text mirrors the ensuing tension in the tavern.

³I have taken this term from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s work: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minnesota, 1987).

⁴Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982).

⁵Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9.

⁶Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966), 115.

⁷Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge, 1989), 48.

Her desirable and enticing body that captivated her audience just moments before is now replaced with the imagery of her frowning and clenching her fist (23). Her audience, who is described earlier as her “discontented lovers” (24), is now referred to as *gurub-e sitamgar*, “group of tyrants/mob of oppressors” (37, 41). The source of this tension is introduced as the regret for a life devoid of joy (28), a life that has been spent in giving joy to others, but not even for a moment feeling it in her own heart (29–30). The tension culminates in the dancing girl’s burst of emotion in line 41, where she addresses the audience directly, shouting: “O you tyrants, you broke my back under the weight of pain / I am thirsty for your blood.” After her audience rejects her interruption by saying she must be either too drunk or simply afflicted with madness, the dancing girl begins to shout again. This time, her questions go to the prediction of an inevitable future. She asks the audience:

Who among you will not push me away tomorrow
 when my youth is no longer?
 Who is it? Tell me! Who is the person among you
 who would liberate me from these drunkards?
 who will give my life a new beginning? (51–55)

What is expressed by the dancing girl in these lines is her outrage at being used for her youth and sexuality, knowing that she will be discarded once she is no longer youthful and desirable.

The conflict between the reality of the dancing girl’s life and the prospect of her bleak future is ritualistically attempted to be deflected in the tavern. The tavern is thus not an isolated space of alterity, but a highly symbolized one. The symbolic space of the communicative association of symbolic significances, if nothing else, justifies a semiotic analysis of this poem. In this context, the tavern, the dancing girl, and the audience may be viewed as signifiers, the meaning of which could be deciphered only in their association with one another, i.e., as they are inserted in a particular discourse. This semiotic turn is anticipated by Connerton’s anthropological recognition of the “encoded” symbolism of rites. We may also view the interaction between the dancing girl and her audience as a signifier, since even relationships can function as signifiers.⁸ In a semiotic sense, the association of signifiers with one another is for the purpose of producing intelligible meaning. In other words, the communicative association of signifiers is a relationship that encodes meaning in acceptable patterns of word-formation. In this sense, the tavern could be conceptualized as a symbolic container for that which is omitted by the regulatory operations of the dominant discourse, and which returns in the nightly ritual of the tavern.

⁸I am taking this extended definition of signifier from the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s theory of signification. See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (Paris, 1966), 501–502.

The Sexuality of the Dancing Girl

What is it that resurfaces in the tavern? The text of the poem does not indicate what exactly this omitted other is, but the foregrounded sexuality of the dancing girl provides the metaphor for it. It is thus prudent to focus on the dancing girl's sexuality. As a metaphor, it preserves and expresses an encoded message that needs to be deciphered. The Freudian model of dream analysis, which articulates the processes of the indirect manifestation of censored expressions, is a useful theoretical model for understanding the cultural processes that are morphologized in the dancing girl's metaphoric sexualization.⁹ Freud identifies four features of these productive mechanisms as: condensation, displacement, representation or symbolization (a process in which "forbidden" dream-thoughts are refracted and distorted so that they can be presented as images), and secondary revision (resolves contradictions and creates an apparent connectedness).¹⁰ The Freudian model of dream analysis has been shown by a number of theorists to parallel linguistic or quasi-linguistic processes. Paul Ricoeur, for example, argues that condensation and displacement "are meaningful operations comparable to rhetorical procedures."¹¹ In this context, condensation and displacement, corresponding to the linguistic processes of metaphor and metonymy, are most germane to the following analysis of the dancing girl's sexuality.

Surely, it is not a coincidence that sexuality as a metaphor is foregrounded in this poem. Michele Foucault has astutely observed that sexuality is not a disobedient stubborn drive to be subdued by the exhaustive efforts of the powers that be. He points to the instrumentality of sexuality by suggesting that sexuality is better conceived as an especially dense transfer point for almost any relations of power.¹² Here, we can move beyond a simplistic reading of this poem as merely instantiating a social cause-and-effect relationship: that the plight of the dancing girl is a product of and, in turn, subverts a cruel and self-serving patriarchal order. "The social" loses its causal explanatory status when the metaphor of sexuality in the nightly dance ritual in the tavern is read according to the functions it seeks to explain. The sexuality of the dancing girl is, therefore, better conceptualized as a libidinal force that condenses in itself intra-personal (i.e., between the dancing girl and her audience) and inter-personal relationships (i.e., within the dancing girl herself). I am using the term "libido" in its Lacanian sense: an exclusively sexual energy, with illusory orientations, and

⁹See Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., trans. and ed. James Strachey (London, 1953–74), 13:34, 65, 95.

¹⁰Freud, *Standard Edition*, 4:277–338, 5:339–508.

¹¹Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay in Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT, 1970), 93.

¹²For example, he notes the relations of power between men and women, young and old, parents and children, teachers and students, priests and laity, and an administration and a population. See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité: La volonté de savoir* (Paris, 1976), 136.

linked to ego and narcissism.¹³ It is particularly relevant that psychoanalysis links libido with the stimulation of the erogenous zones of the body. As the locus of sexual stimulation and libidinal excitement, the tavern can be conceptualized as the site of what we may call an “erogenous zone.” That is to say, the evocative space of the tavern assumes the interiority of condensed relationships that are reproduced in metaphorically libidinal terms. For example, in the first stanza, the “great clamor” that “arose at the heart of the tavern,” noted in the very first line of the poem, is directly linked to the cry of intense desire that arose “from the heart of the drunkards” in line three. Or in the second stanza, the sound of music and the hitting of glasses upon each other, which was fused with laughter and shouts (5–6), is in immediate association with the turning and twisting of the dancing girl’s curvy and delicate body (7), which fans the fires of desire in the drunkards (8).

As a space of metaphorical representation, the tavern functions as more than a space on the margins of the social discourse; the tavern metonymically displaces the social setting and metaphorically substitutes for it. Hence, what is upset in this condensation and displacement is the distinction between the metaphorical status of the tavern and the normative social discourse. What is metaphorically resurfaced in the semiotic register of the tavern is no other than the dominant normative discourse, which leads us to the conclusion that what is ostensibly denied and disguised is the distinction between the two. In other words, the tavern was “the social” all along, even though the latter disavows the former. It is through this exclusionary force of the disavowal of the abject that “the social” establishes itself as the autonomous and self-grounding subject. To quote the post-structuralist feminist philosopher, Judith Butler: “The subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation.”¹⁴

The Epistemic Status of the Dancing Girl

If the tavern is a symbolic representation of social interactions that are reenacted in the nightly ritualistic dance, then what is the epistemic status of the dancing girl? To answer this question, it is instructive to remember that the girl is never named, only referred to by the diminutive *dukbtarak*, “the little girl,” and as *raqqaseb*, “the dancing girl.” Her sexualized body, like her “golden hair” (3), her “soft body” (7), her “naked ivory breast” (10), and “alluring legs” (15) are not simply displayed. Her body has to “perform” her gender; for example, she “tosses” her golden hair (3); or her delicate body “turns and twists” (7). Moreover, it is when she performs her seductive dance that she is defined, her body

¹³See Jacques Lacan, *Les séminaires de Jacques Lacan, livre II: Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse, 1954–1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris, 1978), 375.

¹⁴Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York, 1993), 3.

is inscribed with significance, and her symbolic function is scripted into the text—we can say it is through this performance that she comes to be. Hence, it is the function that she performs, more accurately, the performativity of her function that is highlighted. Butler has a relevant definition of performativity: “In the first instance, performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”¹⁵ The performativity of the dancing girl’s sexed body emerges as it is reiterated night after night, demonstrating that social reality is discursively created through signification, i.e., it is not a pre-existing given. Performativity does not mean free-play or voluntarism. For example, the dancing girl cannot perform something other than the scripted nightly dance. As a communicative mode, performativity is constrained by the symbolic limits and disclosive capacities of the contexts and conventions. Butler’s caveat bears repeating here: “One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well.”¹⁶ The dancing girl is like a signifier, the subject of a system of signification that has already located her within the limits of a certain performativity. She cannot but discursively perform her location, reiteratively enact and reproduce that which her performativity names. She cannot but be the bearer of the sign of signification circulated by the general structure of language. It is in this context that her attempts to disrupt her always already located position must be understood.

The dancing girl’s attempt to upset the locatedness of her subjectivity within culturally constructed norms appears to be an exercise in assertion of her subjectivity. But her assertion of subjectivity is still effected in the context of the tavern within which she is located. Her subjectivity is a construction brought about through the reenactment of signifying arrangements. In other words, the girl’s assertion of subjectivity is not an expression of an otherwise disguised self. The “self” that she is expressing (or disguising) is always already constructed. It is no surprise that she seeks someone from the audience (presumably different than the drunkards of the tavern) to give her life a *new* beginning, hold her hand, and bring her to a better path (53–56, emphasis added). The performativity of her assertion of subjectivity is suggestive of the social fiction and the constructed nature of her subjective self. This is indicated in the text, where her assertion of subjectivity is inscribed in a third-person narrative. We read: “*She* is the one who has given happiness to this group all her life/yet not even for a moment has her heart beaten in happiness” (29–30, emphasis added). The text even distinguishes these lines with quotation marks, even though they are not the direct speech of the dancing girl. Even

¹⁵Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 2; also see Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore, 1990), 270.

¹⁶Butler, “Performative Acts,” 272.

when she does speak in the first person through her own voice (43–44, 49–55), her assertion of subjectivity is met with a strange bewilderment and silence (57–58); she is dismissed as too drunk (46) and afflicted with madness (48). The articulation of the dancing girl's words through different speaking subjects and adding the rejection of her authorial voice by the drunkards are indicative of the dependency of subjectivity on the discourse.

To explain the implications of this dependency, consider the dancing girl's laments: "[Where is *someone*] who would hold *my* hand and bring *me* to a better path?" (55, emphasis added). The terms "someone" and "my" in this line are signifiers, like "who" and "me" in the following line: "Who would liberate *me* from these drunkards?" (54, emphasis added). As signifiers, they lack stable and definite meaning; their meanings, provisional at best, are predicated upon their association with other signifiers as they are located in a discourse. Following the French linguist, Emile Benveniste, we can distinguish between the speaking subject and the subject of speech in these lines. For example, the "me" of the second line is different from the subject who speaks the sentence. This can be extended to wherever "I," "you," "here," and "there" are used. Benveniste argues:

I refers to the act of individual discourse in which it is pronounced, and by this it designates the speaker. It is a term that cannot be identified except in what we have called elsewhere an instance of discourse and that has only a momentary reference. The reality to which it refers is the reality of the discourse.¹⁷

In other words, the semiotic status of "I," "you," "someone," is always dependent on the discourse. They are signifiers that are not actually linked to a real person but to other signifiers. What is most germane to this analysis of this poem is that the dependency of the speaking subject and the subject of speech on discourse implies that the speaker's and listener's roles are endlessly reversible. Therefore, the text does not only implicate the dancing girl and the audience in the process of signification; the "I," "you," and "me" are also uttered by the reader, i.e., they implicate the reader too. In other words, the subjectivity of the reader (or listener, or interpreter, for that matter) too is dependent on the discourse that is activated through the act of reading. It is in this sense that Benveniste's commentator, Kaja Silverman, adds "the spoken subject" to the mix, defining it as the projected reader "in front" of the text.¹⁸ Thus, the performativity of the dancing girl's function could be attributed to the text of the poem itself wherein variable positions of subjectivity (the subject of speech, the speaking subject, and the spoken subject) are discursively constructed. That is to say, the performativity of the text is suggestive of the social fiction and the constructed nature of the reader's own subjective self. The dissemination and circulation of the symbolic valence of the

¹⁷Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Miami, 1971), 218, original emphasis.

¹⁸Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York, 1983), 198.

signifiers in this poem corresponds and coincides with the constructed nature of the reader's subjectivity.

The girl's "dancing" is not simply what she does, nor is "dancing girl" a static description of who she is. These are normative requirements by which she becomes viable; they irrevocably qualify her body and its performance within the domain of cultural intelligibility.¹⁹ We can conceptualize her as the effect of a normative process of meaning production, the constraining normativity of which takes effect to the extent that it is "cited," to borrow from Butler, as such a norm.²⁰ Butler also asserts that to the extent that performativity "acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition."²¹ Taking a cue from Butler, we can argue that, in addition to denying and disguising the distinction between the tavern and the normative dominant discourse noted above, the dancing girl's ritualistic performance dissimulates the cultural/historical norms of which it is a repetition. Further, her performativity, or more accurately the "theatricality" of her performativity, brackets off its own historicity.²² The glimpses of this historicity emerge in line 51 of the text only when her performativity is momentarily interrupted: "Who among you will not push me away tomorrow/ when my youth is no longer?" Or the lines that follow: "Who is the person among you/who would liberate me from these drunkards?" (53–54). The entire stanza is grammatically constructed in the subjunctive mood, suggesting that these are rhetorical questions the answers to which are obvious: no one will alter the dancing girl's predictably bleak future. More importantly, the dancing girl's anticipated future, or we may say her *historicity*, must remain dissimulated if the theatricality of performativity is to be reiteratively sustained. This is precisely what the audience does when it rejects her concerns (45–48). Hence, this textual analysis of this poem is not entirely unrelated to a project of historicizing this poem. Except, instead of searching for clues to the meaning of the text in its historicity, the epistemic engineering of history itself is the focus.

The function of the dancing girl can be further explained by recourse to a term borrowed from postcolonial theory: "subaltern," that which has been rendered without agency. Subaltern owes its currency to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"²³ Spivak's essay title is an entirely apt question to ask about the dancing girl in this poem. Certainly, the dancing girl speaks. She in fact screams at the audience:

¹⁹This is one way that Butler explains performativity. See her *Bodies that Matter*, 2.

²⁰Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 13.

²¹Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 12.

²²Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 12–13.

²³Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice," *Wedge* 7/8 (1985): 120–130. I am fully aware of Spivak's concerns about the misunderstandings and misappropriation of this term by various groups and interests. However, I believe that the use of this term in this context is quite appropriate.

O you mob of oppressors
 you broke my back under the weight of pain!
 I am thirsty for your blood, yes indeed I am!
 Do not throw flowers and do not send kisses either . . . (41–44)

The dancing girl's lashing out against her pre-assigned subjective location shows that, indeed, she, the subaltern, can speak, but she is always already pre-positioned and spoken for. She is conditioned by all that constitutes the subject, such as language. In fact she is referred to only with the diminutive *dukbtarak*, "the little girl" (45). This is not to say that she is insignificant; on the contrary, her presence, like the presence of any subaltern minoritized group, is crucial to the self-definition of the dominant discourse. The identity of the dominant group is established discursively or literally by the repudiation of the subaltern contained in the space of abjection. It is through this repudiation and hegemonic maneuvering toward power that the dominant discourse erases the subaltern's agency. In this poem, the dominant discourse, referred to two times as "the group of tyrants/mob of oppressors" (37, 41), is not interested in hearing what the dancing girl says. This is because the subaltern threatens to unsettle its assumptions of autonomy and self-grounding.

Desire and the Body

The dependency of the dominant discourse for its intelligibility and symbolic legitimacy on the formation of the abject is exemplified in the poem by foregrounding the libidinal force of the audience's desire.²⁴ The audience's desire—and perhaps that of the (male) reader—is linked directly to the body of the dancing girl. Her body is inscribed as highly desired and desiring. The realization of desire does not consist in being "fulfilled," because desire is not a need (a purely biological instinct). The drunkards do not have a need that can be satisfied; for example, it is not the consummative sexual intercourse with the dancing girl that is the issue here. The dancing girl is not a prostitute.²⁵ The audience is there merely to watch her dance, to gaze at her, that is, to position her as the object of their desire. It is not in relation to the realization of desire that the audience's excitement is to be located, but in the recreation of that desire over and over in the nightly ritualistic performance of the dancing girl. Line 4 of the

²⁴Here, I am using desire in its psychoanalytical/semiotic sense as postulated by Jacques Lacan, who views desire as unsatisfiable. Desire is thus not a relation to an object, but a relation to a *lack*; it is recognized only when it is articulated in language. Since it can never be fully articulated, desire is forever bound up with the play of signifiers, and its realization is continually deferred. See Lacan, *Écrits*, 512.

²⁵In fact, Behbahani has a different well-known poem entitled the "The Prostitute's Song." See her *Majmū'a-yi Ash'ar*, 21–23. For an excellent translation of this and other selected poems of Behbahani, see Milani and Safa, *A Cup of Sin*, 128–129.

text is an allusion to this desire: “A cry of desire rose from the heart of the drunkards.” Line 8 also refers to their “fire of desire.” In lines 17–20 when the dance has ended, the drunkards, now described as “wine-worshippers,” tear their clothes out of joy, clap their hands, “happily and drunkenly biting the backs of their hands.”²⁶ Hence, the desire of the drunkards is instituted and circulated as insatiable, inscribing the dancing girl’s body simultaneously as abject and desired.

Here, the valence of abjection is constructed through the disavowal of the symbolic female body which is positioned beyond reach—perhaps even for those possessing a body marked female (i.e., women). Yet, this body is simultaneously inscribed with desire. In the words of Rebecca Schneider, the dancing girl’s body is “the emblematic female body in a particular relation to impossibility;” it is “always beyond reach, symbolizing that which can never quite be acquired.”²⁷ The dancing girl’s body is in the center of this poem, visible in almost every line, yet she signifies a flirtatious impossibility of access, a paradoxical reality that is forever already lost. In this context, the poem does not erect a “true woman” or a “real woman” as much as it explicates the semiotic-symbolic service of bodies, more specifically female body, to the dreamscapes of desire. Hence, the dancing girl is not so much a threat to the social norms as she is to the process of meaning production; that is to say, to the ways in which the norms themselves are constructed. To use Butler’s words, her threat is not “a permanent contestation of social norms condemned to the pathos of perpetual failure, but rather a critical resource in the struggle to articulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility.”²⁸

Conclusion

In this poem, Bebbahani gives the subaltern social outcast a voice, she confers visibility and agency to the dancing girl. The dancing girl is not merely spoken for, she speaks so loudly that the entire tavern scene is forced to come to a halt. This evokes a halt in the process of reading and interpreting this tale. The audience/reader of the poem is prompted to evaluate their own self-constructed space of abjection, where an ever-so-elusive object of desire is discursively constructed in preconfigured molds. She is prompting the reader to (con)textualize his/her assigned cultural location. This is an invitation to read the subjective self as a text, the textuality of which is dependent on the discourse. This way, the conflict, disguise, denial, abjection, displacement, and metaphoric sexualization in the poem could be viewed as corresponding to the cultural processes that are operative in the construction of the reader’s subjective self. By reading

²⁶This is a gesture of frustration and regret, perhaps for a sexual encounter with the dancing girl that can never be.

²⁷Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London, 1997), 5.

²⁸Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 3.

the text of this poem as discursively exteriorizing the reader's constructed self, the regulatory operations of the culture and the mechanism of the cultural production of meaning are opened to interrogation.

This poem brings about the interrogation of cultural processes and social theatrics, demonstrating that in the same way that classical terms are differently signified, the cultural assumptions too could be differentially scripted. It is on the surface of the body and along its contours that the communicative association of the social/physical bodies with their context are staged and hosts of cultural signifiers are propped—just as it is on the surface of the poem that the bodies (desired, abject, social, physical) are discursively inscribed. Hence, the significance of this poem is not contingent upon the modality of historical signifiers that influenced its genesis. Nor should the significance of this poem be located only in its expression of socio-cultural experiences. The significance of this poem, and accordingly Behbahani's contribution to the literary-cultural history of Iran, lies not in its references to a given historical context, but in its capacity to prompt our thinking beyond the historically given and our imagination outside the contextually known.

Translation of the Poem

“Dancing Girl”

- 1 There was an uproar in the tavern
 as the dancing girl entered dancing:
 tossing her golden hair and pleated skirt
 a cry of desire rose from the heart of the drunkards

- 5 The sound of music and glasses hitting upon each other
 laughter and shouts mixing in the air
 the twisting and turning of her delicate and curvaceous body
 fanned the fire of desire in her audience

- 9 It sent shivers of happiness through the bodies of the drunkards
 the flaunting of her naked ivory breasts.
 The golden ripples on the fine silk of her clothes were like
 the rays of the morning sun, and the waves on a pond

- 13 Those hips, winding like a famished snake
 smooth and slippery like liquid silver
 her alluring legs, shining forth from the slit in her dark skirt,
 like the brightness of the moon from the darkness of the night . . .

- 17 The dance came to an end, and the wine-worshippers
clapped their hands and tore their clothes
threw flowers on the head of that blossomed flower
happily and drunkenly biting the backs of their hands
- 21 The dancing girl, however—unlike the previous night—
did not become happy, did not try to captivate their hearts, did not laugh.
She frowned, and clenching her fists,
did not relish in the joy of her discontented lovers.
- 25 Her eyes full of intoxication, drunk and feverish,
her intoxication had the color of pain and the bitterness of sorrow
drunkenness was spreading in her, warm and fiendish
the regret for a life devoid of joy and excitement.
- 29 She is the one who has given happiness to this group all her life
yet not even for a moment has her heart beaten in happiness
she is the one who all her life has given others a taste of the wine of pleasure
she herself—alas!—has not tasted a drop of it
- 33 She is the one who, to keep from causing sorrow with her lament,
has secretly burnt up inside and sown tight her lips
she is the one who, like a candle with the flame of regret
has burnt the night away right before the mob
- 37 Alas that from this group of tyrants
she must revenge her tired and distressed heart
perhaps from now on, from this horrible place of decay,
her chained foot can be freed
- 41 She screamed: “O you mob of oppressors
you broke my back under the weight of pain!
I am thirsty for your blood, yes indeed I am!
Do not throw flowers and do not send kisses either . . .”
- 45 One amongst them said, “The little girl is drunk,
tonight her intoxication is more than can be measured!
O, see her face became dark in anger!
Drunk . . . no, this poor thing is afflicted with madness!”
- 49 Again the young girl screamed: “Tell me,
who is it? Who among you is there?
Who among you will not push me away tomorrow
when my youth is no longer?”

- 53 Who is it? Tell me! Who is the person among you
who would liberate me from these drunkards?
Who will give my life a new beginning?
Hold my hand and bring me to a better path?"
- 57 Among the drunkards these words of the girl
spread a strange bewilderment and silence –
that intoxicated mob's answer was only this:
after a moment of silence . . . a few laughs . . .