

# Sohrab Sepehri, a Universal Poet: An Introduction to His Life and Works

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## Introduction

Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980) is one of the best known and most beloved poets of contemporary Iran, celebrated also for his work as a modernist painter. Although a number of studies in Iran have been devoted to his work, there are very few scholarly studies on him outside that country. Among the most recent works on Sepehri in English are Bahar Davary's *Ecotheology and Love: The Converging Poetics of Sohrab Sepehri and James Baldwin*<sup>1</sup> and *The Eight Books: A Complete English Translation*, which is the rendering of Sepehri's *Hasht kitab* by Pouneh Shabani-Jadidi and Prashant Keshavmurthy.<sup>2</sup> There are of course translations of selected poems, such as by Bahiyeh Afnan Shahid

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<sup>1</sup>Bahar Davary, *Ecotheology and Love: The Converging Poetics of Sohrab Sepehri and James Baldwin* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022).

<sup>2</sup>Sohrab Sepehri, *The Eight Books: A Complete English Translation*, trans. Pouneh Shabani-Jadidi and Prashant Keshavmurthy (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021).

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in *Sohrab Sepehri: A Selection of Poems from the Eight Books*,<sup>3</sup> as well as *The Oasis of Now: Selected Poems*, translated by Kazim Ali and Mohammad Jafar Mahallati.<sup>4</sup>

This article presents an introductory overview of Sepehri's work and delves into various aspects of his life as a poet and as an artist. Through several excerpts from his poetry, the article explores the relationship between events and milestones in his life and his poetry as well as his beliefs and worldview. It also seeks to illuminate connections between Sepehri's poetry and his painting.

### On Sepehri's Life

Sohrab Sepehri was born in Qom on October 6, 1928, in his words, "exactly at 12:00 (noon)." His birth city has also been recorded as Kashan in various sources including by his sister in his posthumous publication *Utaq-i Abi* (The Blue Room).<sup>5</sup> His father Asadollah and his mother Mah-Jabin both partook in art and poetry, and his ancestry goes back to Lisan al-Molk Sepehr, historian-littérateur of Iran's nineteenth-century Qajar period, and author of *Nasikh al-Tavarikh*. Sepehri passed away from leukemia in Tehran on April 21, 1980.

During 1933 to 1940, Sepehri attended Khayyam School in Kashan, where he started painting early on at the encouragement of his father. At this time, he wrote his first poem, at the age of ten:

From Friday until Tuesday sleeping and whimpering  
Never did I think of the elementary school.<sup>6</sup>

Sepehri's first job was at the Kāshān Textile Factory where he worked for two months in 1940. This experience seems to be reflected in his use of certain expressions of the craft in his poetry. He has used

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<sup>3</sup>Sohrab Sepehri, *Sohrab Sepehri: A Selection of Poems from the Eight Books*, trans. Bahiyeh Afnan Shahid (Bloomington: Balboa Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup>Sohrab Sepehri, *The Oasis of Now: Selected Poems*, trans. Kazim Ali and Mohammad Jafar Mahallati (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions Ltd., 2013).

<sup>5</sup>Sohrab Sepehri, *Utaq-i Abi* [The Blue Room], ed. Piruz Sayyar, with the assistance of Parvaneh Sepehri (Tehran: Nigah Publishing House, 2003).

<sup>6</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 26.

the expression *tar-o pud* (warp and weft) or other similar terms at least eight times throughout *Hasht kitab*. One example appears below which is an excerpt from his poem “The Tile Flower”:

My gaze was fixed upon the black *warp and weft* of the flower stem  
and sensed the heat of its veins:  
all my life had dripped into the throat of the tile-flower.  
The tile-flower had another life.<sup>7</sup>

Another example can be seen within Sepehri’s “The Lost Moment”:

It hung its lantern in space.  
It was seeking me in lit places.  
It traversed my room’s *warp and weft*  
and didn’t reach me.  
A breeze swallowed the lantern’s flame.<sup>8</sup>

A further example can be found in the following lines, excerpted from his poem, “Wandering Hell”:

I have drunk the night  
and I weep upon these broken branches.  
Let me be  
O wandering fevered eyes!  
Let me be with the pain of being.  
Don’t let me take apart the dream of my existence.  
Don’t let me raise my head from the dark pillow of solitude  
and cling to the *threadbare* skirts of dreams.<sup>9</sup>

After leaving his job in the Textile Factory, Sepehri was temporarily hired by the Ministry of Agriculture as a field worker to fight a plague of locusts that had afflicted Kashan that year. He mentions this in his autobiography in a passage revealing much about his attitudes toward life and nature.

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<sup>7</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 93.

<sup>8</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 103.

<sup>9</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 85.

I don't remember the year of the summer in which locusts invaded our village. They did a lot of damage. I was appointed officer to fight the locusts in one of the villages. To tell you the truth, I didn't draw up plans to kill even one locust. When I walked through the farms, I was careful not to step on locusts. If they were eating the crops, they were obviously hungry.<sup>10</sup>

This unique experience also became the basis of some of his later poems, like "The Water's Footfall." Below is an excerpt from this poem, in which Sepehri merges words and mental images in order to depict man's force upon nature and vice versa.

Assault of mosque-tiles on prostration.  
Assault of wind on the ascension of soap bubble.  
Assault of butterfly army on the "Pesticide" program.  
Assault of dragonfly squadron on the queue of "Plumbers".  
Assault of reed-pen regiment on lead letters.  
Assault of words on the poet's jaw.<sup>11</sup>

Later, from September 1940 until June 1943, Sepehri attended Pahlavi High School in Kashan where he briefly studied the *santur* musical instrument and continued painting. In September 1943, Sepehri moved to Tehran to attend the Teachers' Training School. After graduating in June 1945, he returned to Kashan and started working at Kashan's Office of Education. It was there that he met the poet Moshfeq Kashani (pen name of 'Abbas Key-Manesh, 1925-2015) who encouraged him to write poetry. Also, during this period, he studied the poetry of Sa'eb (1607-1675) and Bidel (1644-1721), both of whom greatly influenced his work.

The summer of 1948 saw Sepehri's meeting with the poet and painter Manuchehr Sheybani (1923-1991), which transformed his life. It was after this encounter that he went on to study painting at the Fine Arts University in Tehran. In the same year that he started university, he

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<sup>10</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 27-28.

<sup>11</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 227.

quit his job at Kashan's Bureau of Culture and started working at the then Anglo-Persian Oil Company. This job did not make him happy, however, because it took him away from poetry and painting. Therefore, he decided to focus solely on his studies at the university and he received his BA with Honors in Painting from the Fine Arts University in 1953. A year later, he held his first painting exhibition in Tehran, which was very well received. When he was offered a position to teach at the University of Fine Arts, he enthusiastically accepted.

### On Sepehri's Works

During the years that Sepehri was completing his studies at the Fine Arts University, he published some of his work in journals as well as in the poetry collection, *Marg-i rang* (The Death of Colour) in 1951. This work was much influenced by the poetry of Nima Yushij (1897-1960), considered the father of modern Persian poetry. Sepehri had published another poetry collection before that, *Dar kinar-i chaman* (By the Meadow), also referred to as *Aramgah-i 'ishq* (The Tomb of Love; 1947), which was in *masnavi* form and for which Moshfeq Kashani had written an introduction, but this work did not receive much attention. In 1945 Sepehri had written an introduction to Kashani's *Memories of Youth*.<sup>12</sup>

After publishing *Marg-i rang*, in which he makes frequent use of painting metaphors, and generally in the early 1950s, Sepehri began his acquaintance and friendship with other well-known poets and painters, such as the poets Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), Nader Naderpur (1929-2000), and Nosrat Rahmani (1929-2000), and painters Marko Gregorian (1925-2007), Parviz Kalantari (1931-2016), Bahman Mohasses (1930-2010), Sadeq Tabrizi (1938-2017), and the sculptor Parviz Tanavoli (b. 1937).<sup>13</sup> All these people had an influence on his works to some extent.

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<sup>12</sup>Kamyar Abedi, *Az Musahibat-i Aftab* [By the Conversation with the Sun] (Tehran: Sales Publishing House, 1996).

<sup>13</sup>Houman Sarshar, "Sepehri, Sohrab," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, last modified August 15, 2009. [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sepehri-sohrab](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sepehri-sohrab)

In 1954, Sepehri published his second poetry collection, *Zindagi-yi khvabha* (Life of Dreams). This work mostly concerns the poet's inner journey rather than painting the world outside of the artist, as in his first collection. We read about his dreams and aspirations in this collection which sets the background for his future works.

During his years teaching at the university, Sepehri travelled extensively and learned several foreign languages, which led him to translate works into Persian. For example, in 1955 he translated several poems from Japanese into Persian and published them in the journal *Sukhan*. In 1957, during one of his trips to France, he enrolled himself in the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, studying lithography and spending some of his time visiting museums in France, Germany, Austria, and Italy. In 1959, Sepehri participated in the first Tehran Biennale, receiving first prize for his paintings, four of which were selected to be displayed at the Venice Biennale. Shortly thereafter, he returned to Iran and started working as the supervisor of the audio-visual programs at the Ministry of Agriculture.

Sepehri loved traveling, and in 1960 he went to Japan where he stayed for six months studying the Japanese language as well as woodblock printing with Unichi Hiratsuka (1895-1997), one of the most prominent names in twentieth-century Japanese art. He also travelled to Pakistan and India, where he studied ancient Indian artifacts. When in India, he visited Agra and the Taj Mahal, reference to which can be seen in several of the poems in his 1977 collection *Hasht kitab* (The Eight Books; 1977).

Sepehri returned to Iran at the end of the year 1960 and participated in the second Tehran Biennale, winning the Grand Prize of Fine Arts. In 1961, he published his third collection of poetry, *Avar-i aftar* (The Ruin of the Sun), in which he seems to be waking up from the dream he was traversing in the previous book, moving towards nature, and ultimately trying to find the creator of all its beauty. In the same year, he published his fourth collection of poetry, *Sharq-i anduh* (East of Sorrow), which is a record of his first mystical experiences and the attainment of a kind of Buddhist tranquility.

In 1962, Sepehri quit his job at the Ministry of Agriculture and focused his time on his passions, painting and poetry. As a result, he displayed paintings at several exhibitions in Tehran, Paris, New Delhi, and Benares (Varanasi).

In 1965, Sepehri published his fifth book, comprised of one single long poem—by far, the poet’s best-known in Iran and the West. The poem and eponymous book is called *Sada-yi pa-yi ab* (The Water’s Footfall), and here the poet marries images and words using simple yet profound language. In this poem, the poet takes the reader on an inner journey of self-discovery. Intensely intimate and personal, the poem at the same time speaks to the human and universal.

After this book, Sepehri travelled to Munich and London in 1965, and to France, Spain, the Netherlands, Italy, and Austria in 1966. Upon returning to Iran, he stayed at his sister’s house in the northern Iranian city of Babol. During this year, he published his sixth book which also consists of one long poem called *Musufir* (Traveler). In contrast to the fifth book, the poet here leads the reader on an external or outward facing journey, mentioning the proper names of many specific locations, books, and people. Throughout this long poem, he puts these proper nouns in quotation marks to show their specificity. Below are two excerpts from his poem “Musufir” that contain proper nouns in quotation marks, referring to specific places.

In that minute when you were looking down from summer’s height  
to the roaring ‘Jajrud’,  
what happened  
that the starlings harvested your green dream?<sup>14</sup>

Or, as when in another part of the poem, he says:

Do you remember ‘Venice’?  
And upon the tranquil canal?  
In that noisy wrangling of water and land

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<sup>14</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 259.

when time was seen through the prism,  
the boat's shaking shook your mind:  
the dust of habit lies perpetually on the gaze's path.<sup>15</sup>

His seventh book, *Hajm-i sabz* (The Green Volume), was published a year later in 1967. This collection is more vivid and clear than Sepehri's previous works. It is considered the poet's most complete book as he seems to have attained a kind of serene resolution and to have found answers to questions he had posed in his previous books.

In 1970 Sepehri travelled to the United States, visiting California and New York and staying on Long Island for eight months. He then returned to Iran, only going back briefly to the United States, in 1971. In 1973, he travelled to France. After staying a while in Paris, he traveled in 1974 to Greece and Egypt on his way back to Iran. In 1975 he participated in Tehran's First International Arts Festival, and later that year he received the Forough Farrokhzad Poetry Award.

Sepehri's last collection of poems was published near the end of his life, ten years after his seventh book. In this collection, called *Ma hich ma nigah* (Us Nil, Us Gaze), Sepehri seems inclined toward despair, perhaps with knowledge of the approaching end of his life. His lyric form in this collection is free to the point of being prosaic except for line-breaks, metaphors, and slight stylizations that raise conversational Persian to a literary level. This final book was published in one volume together with the poet's previous seven books, under the title *Hasht kitab*. No other poem by Sepehri has been published since, and *The Eight Books* is considered his final and most comprehensive work.

Sepehri never married, and for most of his adult life he lived with his mother and younger sister Parvaneh, in a duplex in the northwestern part of Tehran. Even in his poetry, he does not talk about earthly love. For him, woman is part of nature rather than an object of his affection. He talks about women as he talks about other elements in nature. For example, he writes in *The Eight Books*, "The myth bird flew out

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<sup>15</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 261.



through the woman's cleft chest, and its gaze fell upon their shadow;"<sup>16</sup> and "The gaze of a woman, like a pleasant dream, settles upon my eyes;"<sup>17</sup> and "I went, I went till woman. Till pleasure's lamp, till desire's silence, till the sound of the wings of loneliness."<sup>18</sup> In none of these cases is he talking about a certain woman, who is the object of his passion. This is another feature of his poetry that makes it more universal and less personal. Even when he writes about himself autobiographically, he is in fact talking about all humans. For example, he says, "I'm from Kashan, but my city is not Kashan. My city is lost;"<sup>19</sup> and "I'm from Kashan. My ancestry might reach to a plant in India, pottery from 'Sialk.' My ancestry might reach to a prostitute in Bukhara."<sup>20</sup>

After Sepehri's death, his sister, Parvaneh Sepehri, published *The Blue Room*, which contains three texts that he was working on at the end of his life. According to Piruz Sayyar, the editor of this book, two of these three texts are complete, namely, "The Blue Room," which describes both a blue room in the family garden that Sepehri imagined to be his mandala, as well as his meditations on the color blue. The second complete text is "Our Art Teacher," which is about the shortcomings and flaws in the education system of Iran, such as physical punishment and the superiority of the old curriculum and of old tools over new ones. He calls a marker "colorful obscenity" and considers himself lucky to be able to use pencils and colored pencils at school. In the eponymous "The Blue Room," Sepehri even mentions the date of completion at the end of the text as 1976.

Sepehri passed away before he could complete the third text in this book, "Conversation with the Professor," which is about various schools of painting and the differences between features of Western and Eastern painting. With the help of Parvaneh Sepehri, Sayyar collated these three texts into one volume, entitled *The Blue Room*. To be as faithful to the

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<sup>16</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 113.

<sup>17</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 181.

<sup>18</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 221.

<sup>19</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 231.

<sup>20</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 217.

texts as possible, he kept Sepehri's notes in the margin and as footnotes.

All three texts are autobiographical. The first two texts are simple and sometimes conversational, whereas the last text, "Conversation with the Professor," is literal and poetic, sometimes even archaic. For example, Sepehri makes archaic use of the -ra, that is, as a possessive marker, rather than its modern usage as a specific direct object marker, when he writes, "Hunar-i sharq ra yik vizhagi ast" (Eastern Art Has One Feature) and "But-shikanan ra aqidat in bud" (The Iconoclasts Were of the Opinion). Moreover, it is in these three texts, especially in "Conversation with the Professor," that Sepehri's symbolism can be inferred, understood, and interpreted.

### On Sepehri's Style

Sepehri's genius lies in his unique ability to marry poetry and painting such that his painting can be traced in his poetry, and his poetry can be heard from within his painting. Another feature that makes Sepehri distinct from other Iranian poets is his mixing of Buddhist and Islamic and Sufi metaphors and allusions. When reading Sepehri's poetry, one envisions a Buddhist tanka or an Islamic World miniature. Sepehri's poetry and even his metaphors are fresh and innovative, making the reading of his poetry a journey through a dreamscape.

Impressionism, clearly the style of Sepehri's painting, is also a vivid description of his poetry, as we can see below from the Metropolitan Museum of Art's description of this style:

It demonstrates the techniques many of the independent artists adopted: short, broken brushstrokes that barely convey forms, pure unblended colors, and an emphasis on the effects of light. Rather than neutral white, grays, and blacks, impressionists often rendered shadows and highlights in color. The artists' loose brushwork gives an effect of spontaneity and effortlessness that masks their often carefully constructed compositions.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Margaret Samu, "Impressionism: Art and Modernity," THE MET, October 2004, [www.met-museum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd\\_imml.htm](http://www.met-museum.org/toah/hd/imml/hd_imml.htm).

Sepehri's poems are short, broken, and barely convey forms. At times, the words seem to be unblended, just like the colors in an impressionist painting. Sepehri is infatuated with light and the narrow opening or aperture through which the light emanates. He uses words on a page as he would use color on a canvas. His poetry seems to be spontaneous and effortless, masking the carefully constructed ideas behind the words. Both his paintings and his poetry seem simple, pure, honest, yet complex, subtle, and intriguing.

Some consider Sepehri's poetry style as a specimen of the Indian style or the Isfahani style, which is a period designation rather than a geographical one, referring to the style of Persian poetry that reached its peak in the fifteenth century. The pioneer of the Indian style is purported to be Amir Khosrow Dehlavi (1253-1325). In the mid-eighteenth century, this style was supplanted in Iran by "literary return," a new style that tried to imitate earlier styles like the Khorasani and the Iraqi. However, the Indian style continued to flourish even after the mid-eighteenth century in the courts of the Ottoman Empire, Central Asia, and the Indian Subcontinent.<sup>22</sup> Although some scholars hold that traveling to India led the poet to a state of inner peace, others believe that Sepehri never reached peace, and that this can be inferred from his poem "Traveler," wherein he states, "No, union is impossible, there is always a distance."<sup>23</sup>

In addition to Nima Yushij, other contemporary poets such as the most celebrated modern Iranian poet, Forough Farrokhzad (1934-1967), also had a strong influence on Sepehri. They both mastered using words to show the beauties of nature, such as "water", "light", "sand", etc. Further, in his reference to the "friend" in "Where is the Friend's House?" or in his poem "Friend," when he says, "She was grand and she was one of today's residents," Sepehri seems to be referring to Forough.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, in the last stanza of "Friend," Sepehri seems to be referring

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<sup>22</sup>J. T. P. de Bruijn, *A General Introduction to Persian Literature: History of Persian Literature*, Vol I. (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2009).

<sup>23</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 253.

<sup>24</sup>Bahram Meghdadi. *Hidayat va Sepehri* [Hidayat and Sepehri] (Tehran: Hashemi Publishing House, 1999).

to Forough's untimely death and the effect it had on him.

But she couldn't  
sit facing the clarity of the pigeons  
and she went to the edge of nothingness  
and lay behind the patience of lights  
and didn't think at all  
amidst the disturbed pronunciation of doors  
how lonely we remained  
to eat an apple.<sup>25</sup>

In the above excerpt, Sepehri uses a novel combination of words, like "the clarity of the pigeons," or "the disturbed pronunciation of words," which are not used commonly, but then again that is the mastery of Sepehri in his modern approach to creating images that are novel and thought-provoking. Some translators of his poetry (e.g., Afnan Shahid, and Ali and Mahallati) have tried to interpret these novel phrases and translate them to something that makes sense to them, yet this reduces Sepehri's poetry into something that is far from the poet's original intention. Another distinctive feature of Sepehri's poetry is his precision and succinctness. Each line embeds an array of complex ideas. Another feature is the expression of profound ideas by the simplest words. Therefore, at first glance, Sepehri's poetry might seem very simple and uncomplicated, but once re-read, reflecting on the meaning concealed behind the mere words, a complex structure of ideas is manifest. Like the world and its creatures as the manifestation of the creator, Sepehri's words are the manifestation of the most important questions of existence and of the creator.

Another unique trait of Sepehri's poetry is his composing novel compounds, that is, combining two or more words together to constitute a single concept. Some of these compounds that appear in *The Eight Books* are "lagoon of oblivion,"<sup>26</sup> "roof of illumination,"<sup>27</sup> "waters of

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<sup>25</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 329-331.

<sup>26</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 123.

<sup>27</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 223.

friendship,”<sup>28</sup> “nocturnal fingers,”<sup>29</sup> and “raw fruit of inspiration.”<sup>30</sup> The effect of Sepehri’s novel compounds is to render his poetry fresh rather than stuck in the clichéd metaphors that can make poetry repetitive and dull. In any language, there are certain expressions, called frozen expressions or formulaic language, in which certain words combine to denote a holistic meaning. They are called frozen because one cannot simply replace the existing words with other words and expect the same meaning to come across. For example, in English, something is as soft as silk, but in Persian, something is as soft as cotton. In English, the beloved is slender, while in Persian, the beloved is as tall as the cypress.

Indeed, the creation of novel compounds is the most enduring feature of Sepehri’s poetry. However, the most distinctive feature of his poetry both in the first and in the second period is his invention of novel compounds that are mostly of the Noun-Noun and Noun-Adjective kinds. Some of these compounds are simple, matching, and concordant (e.g., color of silence, rain of light, lagoon of oblivion, etc. from the first period; and sweet anxiety, roof of illumination, odorous minutes, etc., from the second period), while others are difficult, unmatching, and discordant (e.g., song of poison, laughter of moment, worm of thought, etc., from the first period; and sides of leisure, mouth of patience, waters of friendship, etc., from the second period). Some of these compounds are composed of more than two words, which makes them even harder for the reader to grasp (e.g., cloudy movement of dream, nocturnal branch of thought, cold bone of grass, etc., from the first period; and soft grass of contemplation, unripe fruit of inspiration, moist height of encounter, etc., from the second period). The number of these complicated compounds increases in his last book, *Us Nil, Us Gaze*, which might be due to his knowledge of the imminence of his death.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 363.

<sup>29</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 167.

<sup>30</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 361.

<sup>31</sup>Mohammad Hoquqi, *Sohrab Sepehri, Shi'r-i zaman-i ma sih* [Sohrab Sepehri: Poetry of our Time 3] (Tehran: Nigah Publishing House, 2007).

One important characteristic of modern Persian literature is the sense of familiarity and continuity that is formed by use of the same metaphors throughout the prose and poetry of classical and modern Persian. However, many modern poets, the pioneer of whom is Nima Yushij, broke loose from these clichés and invented their own fresh expressions and metaphors. Sohrab Sepehri is a master in doing just that when, in *The Eight Books*, he writes “the roof of an illusion,”<sup>32</sup> “astonishment will be tattered,”<sup>33</sup> “time’s root of asceticism,”<sup>34</sup> “stem of meaning,”<sup>35</sup> etc. However, in almost all such novel expressions, he merges nature with the abstract, thus making the abstract tangible. Sepehri was influenced by Japanese Zen Buddhism in his paintings and his poetry to the extent that he finds beauty and ephemerality in everything, be it in the moonlight or in a fever; in his own words, “Let us not swear at the moonlight if we have a fever,”<sup>36</sup> and “I have seen at times in a fever the moon descending.”<sup>37</sup>

The influence of mystic poetry, especially Rumi’s poetry and philosophy, on Sepehri’s poetry is most vividly seen in his collection, *East of Sorrow*, in which the theme of most of the poems is the “east of sorrow of human nature.” Starting from the poem “My Passion,” Sepehri’s poetry seems to have reached perfection. He sees the world through a pantheistic lens, hence considering all religions as one whose essence is the existence of God. Sepehri’s philosophy seems also to be in line with phenomenology in that the truth can be perceived through the senses.

Reading through his works, one finds signs that Sepehri is well-versed in the Torah and the Bible. In his poem “Surah of Spectacle,” he is clearly referring to the Bible’s first phrase, “On the spectacle, I swear,

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<sup>32</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 377.

<sup>33</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 377.

<sup>34</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 377.

<sup>35</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 377.

<sup>36</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 243.

<sup>37</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 243.

and on the beginning of the word.”<sup>38</sup> And in his poem “Traveler,” he is referring to the Torah when he says, “On the journey, the chaste monks were pointing toward the silent memory of ‘Jeremiah’/And I was reading ‘Ecclesiastes.’”<sup>39</sup>

Sepehri is believed to have been most influenced by mysticism in his three collections of poetry, *The Water’s Footfall*, *The Traveler*, and *The Green Volume*.<sup>40</sup> Sirus Shamisa holds that Sepehri was well acquainted with and influenced by the Indian modern mystic, Krishnamurti (1895-1986), who states that in every glimpse, there are three factors: the observation, the observer, and the observed, the last two of which must be one and the same in order for us to refrain from making false pre-judgements. In Sepehri’s worldview, this is the reason why we have the false beliefs that “the horse is a noble animal,”<sup>41</sup> or “the pigeon is beautiful,”<sup>42</sup> or “how is clover any less than the red tulip.”<sup>43</sup> That is why one must swim in “the pond of ‘Now.’”<sup>44</sup>

Sepehri dedicated his long poem *The Water’s Footfall* to his mother’s silent night, that is, the night of her passing. Throughout the poem, there are references to death, and it seems that the poet is trying to convince himself that death is not the end, and that death and life are one and the same. For example, when he says, “Death is not the end of the pigeon,” or, “Death at times picks basil,” he seems to be referring to his mother. Or when he says, “Death at times drinks vodka,” he might be referring to his father.

On the subject of death, Meskoob reflects on the end of Sepehri’s life and his surrender to leukemia. He describes visiting Sepehri in the hospital and their conversation about the criteria of beauty. He recounts that Sepehri had told him he wondered when he would recover from

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<sup>38</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 309.

<sup>39</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 265.

<sup>40</sup>Sirus Shamisa, “Musafiri chun ab” [A Traveler like Water], *Kayhan-i farhangi* [Cultural Kayhan] 6, no. 2 (1989): 28-30.

<sup>41</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 237.

<sup>42</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 237.

<sup>43</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 237.

<sup>44</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 239.

this illness so that he could finish his incomplete work.<sup>45</sup>

Sepehri, concerned less with society and more so with the environment, uses his poetry to bond humans with their natural surroundings. Criticizing modernity in favor of the simplicity of the past, his poetry is, in a way, ahead of its time, as the reader can discern contemporary topics and issues bursting forth from the verses: environmental protection (e.g., “Let us not muddy the water”), religious tolerance (pantheistic ideas throughout his works), migration (e.g., “Wherever I am, let me be, the sky is mine”), universal peace and compassion (e.g., “Tell me about the bombs that fell when I was sleeping; tell me about the eyes that moistened when I was sleeping”).

Sepehri’s poetry can be divided into two periods, the first period includes his first four collections, namely *The Death of Colour*, *Life of Dreams*, *The Ruin of the Sun*, and *East of Sorrow*, while the second period encompasses his last four collections, namely, *The Water’s Footfall*, *Traveler*, *Green Volume*, and *Us Nil, Us Gaze*. *The Water’s Footfall* is considered a turning point in his poetry, the point at which his poetry reaches perfection.<sup>46</sup> In his poetry before *The Water’s Footfall*, his poems have meter and rhyme, the kind of rhyme that follows Nima’s poetry. In *East of Sorrow*, the rhymes follow more of a classical style. His early poetry, especially that of the first four collections, is heavily influenced by his painting through the use of many metaphors involving paint and color. Another characteristic of this first period is Sepehri’s use of rhythmic prose; however, painting metaphors and rhythmic prose are also found in his second period.

Sepehri’s poetry dwells neither on political ideology, nor on jurisprudence, and nor still on religious righteousness. In “Water’s Footfall” he says, “I saw a train carrying jurisprudence, and how laboriously it was going/I saw a train carrying politics (and how empty it was going),”<sup>47</sup> and then he adds, “I saw a train carrying seed of lilies

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<sup>45</sup>Shahrokh Meskoob, *Khvab va khamushi* [Sleep and Silence] (London: Daftar-i khak, 1994).

<sup>46</sup>Hoquqi. *Sohrab Sepehri*.

<sup>47</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 223.



and song of canaries,”<sup>48</sup> and that is his preferred topic of discourse. One can argue that the most significant characteristic of Sepehri’s poetry is its universality. He writes about humans and humanity, environment and nature, peace and compassion, and his poems go beyond any specific era, geographical location, or particular ideology. At times, Sepehri’s poetry seems to be seeking a utopia through observing his world from within and without.

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<sup>48</sup>Sepehri, *The Eight Books*, 223.