

# **Manifestation of Barthes' “Death of the Author” in Sepehri’s Poetry**

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**Abstract** This article applies Roland Barthes’ theory nominated in his most pivotal essay *The Death of the Author* to the art of Sohrab Sepehri, one of the Modern Iranian poets. The study endeavors to extrapolate that Sepehri is not absolutely personal and subjective in his art; rather, he tries to be impersonal and objective in half of his verses. He, most of the time, struggles to hide himself in his poems, and there are poems in which he erases himself to communicate his notions to the readers. Hence, he follows Barthes’ belief that as the author’s ideas take the written form only the text remains. In this sense, he is also following the Formalists and their idea about the autonomy of a text as a self-contained entity which has subterranean connections with its author. Considering such a perspective, the present study is to foreground the manifestation of Barthes’ impersonality of author or “The Death of the Author” in some of Sepehri’s poems. The findings show that Sepehri has aptly incorporated the technique of conveying the entities of the world around him to his readers by challenging their thoughts objectively and not through direct expression.

**Key Words** Sepehri; Barthes; depersonalization of art; transformation of art

In his most celebrating and autonomous essay “The Death of the Author” Barthes puts a lot of emphasis on the science and principles of the Modern literary criticism to state that, upon narration, a fact fails to keep its original voice (*S/Z* 35). This is to say that the author’s voice fades out and becomes imperceptible after he pours out his thoughts and notions in the narrative he is writing. From this perspective, the author’s narrative is an upshot of an impersonal system. Reading Sohrab Sepehri from

this standpoint one can note that for Sepehri, too, the procedure of poetic perception incorporates the poet's sympathetic involvement with natural objects throughout the moments of acute observation or production when the poet loses himself into an object, experiencing the features of the object by virtue of intensified perceptions and intuiting attributes or realities of the object, not contrastingly perceived, so as to provide the reader with an alternative for having manifold interpretations. This bestows upon the readers freedom to get connected to the text through their individual associating system and momentarily disregard the author's aims and intentions. This prominent impersonality in Sepehri's poetry can be securely thought of in connection with Barthes' argument known as "The Death of the Author". Sepehri holds to the transformation of emotions not through expression, but through an exterior correlative of inner feelings. Therefore, a written material or a work of art is an outer correlative of author's inner feelings. Put differently, an artist is to reveal his vocations in the same outer correlative which is projected in a text or a piece of writing; thus, it could be claimed that Sepehri recapitulates what Barthes has already proclaimed.

According to Barthes, the writer should not imbue his oeuvres with his overflowed emotions and sensibilities; rather, by assuming an escape scheme he impersonalizes his self by way of selecting objects that have no bearing to a multitude of definite feelings and incidents which remind him of the personal emotions, recollections and sentiments. Allowing for such a hypothesis, a credible resemblance and uniqueness can be declared between Barthes' idea and its counterpart in Persian Literature recognized as *Tajrid*. While asserting the aptness of equating these terms, Shafiy Kadkani contends that "every work of art is based on *Tajrid*, in which some chosen objects, events, or concrete objects embody the poet's abstract ideas and emotions" (63).

With the above introductory remarks on Barthes and on Sepehri's style of writing we can now draw a parallelism between Barthes' theoretical proposition and Sepehri's practical artistic creation. Far away from Barthes, in another continent, Sepehri was one of the most heterogeneous hunter of objective realities ever existed in the art and literature of Iran, on whose Modernity, Yushij has remarked:

In facing the realities of life, the artist should be overflowing with sensibilities in an appropriate time; hence, the artist's objective experience leads to creativity. Then poetic creation is the result of the artist's hesitative moment in which he is trimmed with observations. In this moment the artist retires to create art (poem) using objects, situations, though these entities might occur in poetry by employing tropes like metaphor, allegory, allusion, metonymy, synesthesia, etc. (54)

Embroidering on Yushij's observations, one can say that the poetic process of artistic creation depends on poets' active sense of perception and imagination as described by Yushij, hence the poetic perception includes the poet's sympathetic identification with natural objects during moments of intense observation. Consequently, the poet is not able to reach such moment of impersonality without completely surrendering himself to the work and the object under process. As quoted by Gray, this term "suggests the artist's sympathetic imagination, the capacity to forget his own personality and enter imaginatively into the existence of others and other kinds of existence" (72). Put differently, we may suggest that both sympathy and empathy are the involuntary projection of ourselves into an object. Accordingly, Sepehri's poetry is predominantly aesthetic and sensuous in appeal, and it contains sympathy as well as empathy as the point of central concern. The idea proposed here will be of use when we see that, more than often, Sepehri metamorphoses himself into objects like animals, plants and other entities to experience different situations. This is to say that he impersonalizes himself in order to remove his own identity from the scene. Achieving this objectivity is equal to the omission of every voice, which is Barthes' slogan, as he elaborates on the issue in his essay that "writing is neutral composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (S/Z 26).

Considering the above mentioned hypothesis on the affinities enrooted between Barthes' idea in "The Death of Author" and Sepehri's objectivity or impersonality, we can now start discussing the poems selected for analysis in this paper. The first poem we analyze and discuss here is "Traveler". The traveler of the poem goes through different places and resembles the inexorable brook. He is a pilgrim in quest of the truth; the quest never ceases until the traveler attains it:

I'm traveling yet,  
I imagine,  
It is a boat in the world waters,  
And I am a passenger of the boat, have been chanting  
The lively song of ancient mariners  
To the ears of season chinks for thousands of years.  
And I am sailing on... where will finish the feet tracks?  
When will be unknotted the shoe laces by gentle fingers of leisure?  
(113-123)<sup>1</sup>

The journey is historical yet it objectively refers to both the poet and all the humanity.

The verb ‘imagine’ in line two objectifies the traveler’s voyage on the world sea. The traveler imagines visiting the people of old primitive world in the remotest parts of the history; their chant is being objectified to the song sung by the mariners in Coleridge’s famous poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”. Additionally, the journey might objectively illustrate the myth of the everlasting journey. Jung, in this regard, believes that “the quest is also an archetype, and mariner or traveler is in search of a reality” (96), a reality which is more substantial than that is embraced by the materialistic society. Another outstanding quality of Sepehri’s poetry is the employment of the term synaesthesia. Kadkani declares, “Sepehri is the master of employing synaesthesia, and this is enrooted in his own new style; and this quality has always objectified his verse” (72). The following extracts from “Traveler” are a good testimony to such a claim:

But sometimes,  
 The strange sound of growth,  
 Reflects,  
 In the brittle joint of joy  
 Knee while ascension knee gets dusty,  
 Maturity fingers,  
 Leave alone,  
 In the concrete geometry of grief. (Sepehri 14-21)

Such objectivity is further emphasized by Shamisa, as he says: “there is an objective impressionism and dramatization in Sepehri’s poetry, especially in his ‘The Water’s Footsteps’ and ‘Traveler’ as the poet employs different images like: blue color and other complementary shades, horizons, sun beam, objects in the different positions, living objects, fresh air .... In this respect Eslin believes that, every dramatic text is literature, even if it is not performed on the stage, this point is common among the narrative and objective genres like tales, epic poem, and drama. The main point that separates drama from other narrative forms is the act of performance” (Shamisa 52).

The other poem worth considering in our present sense of study is “The Hidden Bird”; it is supposed that Sepehri’s bird is the same as that of Keats’s nightingale though there is no transparent evidence to such a claim. Sepehri calls her “the hidden bird”; the poem opens with:

O bird who sings in the hidden places  
 I should speak with you.  
 And you open time by your song!  
 Whence you ached, you sing in your hidden vacancy,

In order to snatch my life joy? (1-6)

Apostrophizing the hidden bird, Sepehri believes that the song of the bird dissolves the sense of time. The poem objectifies the little hidden bird to convey his messages of immortality of arts. This is demonstrated by the poet in the metonymic tone of the song of the bird which is here taken for art in its general transplantation. The bird and her song, one can say, might objectively refer to the everlasting notion of art and its joy in contrast with mortality of other entities in the world. However, Sepehri conceives that the bird is sad, and this sadness is revealed in the bird's song. He continues,

O hidden bird, where are you?  
Under the veil of moist grass.  
Or inside the joyous boughs?  
You fly over the green eye of swamp,  
Or you wash your feathers by the perception spring?  
Wherever you are, tell me.  
There are no enemy's foot tracks.  
Come out!  
Thunder has not kicked the roof of clouds anymore.  
Snake has not come out of its burrow quickly anymore.  
The chain of storm has not rolled over the body of meadow.  
Don't worry anymore? (7-19)

In these lines, Sepehri reveals his sense of innovative metaphorical phrasing to the readers by employing phrases like "veil of moist grass". This is shown when he compares the veil with the moist grass; here the boundary between human and non-human is transgressed, especially in personifying the trees as "the joyous boughs". In the sentence "you fly over the green eyes of swamp, /or you wash your feathers by the perception spring?" he bestows human features on the non-human swamp "whose eyes are green". Indeed, Sepehri eradicates the boundary between human and non-human by personifying spring, and makes it available to an unconscious singer. Here, this notion comes to the readers that, as the bird sings unconsciously, it objectifies the artist (or the poet himself) who takes refuge in the Sepehri's society and crises, as the poet proclaims this notion in the line "there are no enemy's foot tracks. Come out!" In the next lines Sepehri says, "thunder has not kicked the roofs of clouds any more./ Snake has not come out of its burrow quickly anymore". Sepehri again personifies thunder that does not kick the roof of clouds anymore. The phrase "the roof of clouds"

is a metonymy implying calm weather; hence the poet objectively describes the calm weather by calling upon the natural objects. Similarly, snake implies enmity and evil in the reader's mind and the line "snake has not come out of its burrow quickly anymore" reminds reader of the artist's taking refuge in the previous sentence. The lines "the chain of storm has not rolled over the body of meadow / The day is calm, and quiet" personify and illustrate the crises of society; the poet instead of describing the crises of society directly illustrates them by "the chain of storm" rolling in the meadow. This ode enacts a drama which concerns itself with the changing nexus of the relationship of the poet and the nightingale, along with the value system relevant to each and the attempt of the reconciliation of antinomies, among such objects of contemplation is death, a nasty, fearful reality or a transition into a higher, richer and eternal life.

It is necessary here to recall Eslin and his dramatic notions on objectivity of literature and fine arts. The first notion one can recall is "the Icon", which is usually known and discovered through the senses like the picture of an entity, the sound of a bird or the blowing of wind in stormy climate. In fact, these iconic objects are considered as external facts through which the author erases himself while immediately evoking emotions in the readers, as they are innately able to associate their senses with the objects. Sepehri accommodates all the above imagery senses in his poetry and objectively evoked the same in his readers; it seems that in him, as Eliot remarks, there was a separation between the heart which suffered and the mind that created (qtd. in Tilak 354). To exemplify such an objectivity one must go to another instance of Sepehri's poem entitled "The Water's Footsteps" where he says:

Life flies as big as death...  
 Death dwells in the pleasant climate of mind.  
 Death speaks of dawn in the nature of village night.  
 Death goes into the mouth with a bunch of grapes.  
 Death sings in the larynx of red throat.  
 Death is guilty for the beauty of butterfly's wings. (345-350)

This poem is one of the most dramatically pictorial creations. The death embodiment of the poem is apparently emphasizing metempsychosis of Buddhism. Meghdadi says, "Buddhism believes that there is no death, since one accompanies the whole existence of the world; hence death is a changing entity, and after death one's existence transfers to a living existence; therefore, death is vital, it is a part of nature" (48). In the line "life flies as big as death ...", the poet shows 'life' as a bird possessing wings, hence it is an implicit metaphor, because Sepehri does not declare directly that 'life is transient',

but he associates life's fragility with the short life of a bird. In the other part of the poem, Sepehri assures this idea that death is a part of life again: "our hands would search something, if death did not exist...", and this justifies Eslin's notion of the reconciliation of the opposites. In the next line, the poet dehabitualizes the readers' traditional notions of death and says, "we should not be afraid of death; the death is not the end of pigeon". This objectively implies that death accompanies life again; commenting on this Shamisa says, "Sepehri chooses a pigeon, since it flies, and is elegant, so it is a living death" (220). It seems, as Northrop Frye claims, "the unity of life and death is everlasting" (68). The very same idea might raise a question: why do artists in general and Sepehri in particular personify death? The answer justifies Frye's acclamation that death is a part of life, and hence they supplement each other in a Sepehrian way. In the next line of the poem "death inhabits in the good weather of reflection", the poet paradoxically implies that in spite of the disgusting view of death, it lives in good weather, and he personifies it further as he "speaks with the essence of village night about mourning". In the next line, "death is tasted with the bunch of grape in the mouth", the poet draws upon the gustatory image of death in a most objective manner employing a synaesthetic metaphor, so in this way he involves the reader with more than one sense, the taste of death through one's mouth. These instances can transparently direct one to Barthes' views about narrative art:

Extrapolating on the written forms of art, one can say that, as soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the term itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (S/Z 26)

Ironically, this is not an idea put forth by Barthes only. As Barthes, himself, reminds us, Mallarme, in France, wrote that "it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a pre-requisite impersonality, to reach that point where only language acts, performs, and not me" (Ibid). This kind of delicate practice of objectivity and impersonality that Mallarme refers to is apparent in the poem "Always" by Sohrab Sepehri. It is of primary importance to note that by taking the postmodern Jungian assumption into consideration, Sepehri has implicitly described his Anima—an archetype or myth which originates in the collective unconscious—in the poem. Relying on Jung's own words that "collective unconscious describes the psyche which is not perceptible, I call it Psychoid" (436), we can consider Anima as spiritual, everlasting and immortal. This is when immortality has been a quality that human kind has longed for since the beginning of the universe. Sepehri, too, is a poet in

quest of immortality; therefore he describes his wishes in the form of a spiritual quest for the celestial female. Relying on the plausible assumption that Anima often appears in the form of female figures that appear in dreams, pictures, poems, and tales in the female figures we can argue that for Sepehri, this female figure stands as a “primitive nocturnal nymph of speech” (Sepehri 6). Therefore, looking at Sepehri’s “Always” with keen eyes we see that the female figure is used to objectify a concept or allegorize a notion, and since the poet writes in order to let his Anima appear indirectly, he is actually in quest of immortality, and by impersonalizing his wish, the poet shapes an organic female figure and evokes the same in the readers.

Going through the different parts of the poem, we identify a wish or a desire for immortality that is running through the word string; a wish that is hidden in a love-quest which is equated with Sepehri’s personal emotion. So through an imagined self destruction or loss of personal identity, Sepehri identifies himself with a beloved outside himself, and escapes from the material limits and self-centered condition of ordinary experience, to achieve a fellowship with essence. Nonetheless, it seems that Sepehri did not directly mention the Jungian Anima in his poem.

In reality, the poet sets up and searches to solve the basic oppositions between the inevitably mortal pleasures and the conceived possibility of immortal delight in human life. The allegory (Anima) totally fails as his own intensity and authenticity of a unique mystical vision invalidates his weak and faltering espousal of borrowed philosophy. Therefore, it seems that he triumphs in his bold renunciation of that espousal. The dichotomy disappears and the two (ideal, and reality) realize oneness. As a result, in Sepehri’s “Always”, the poet faces the celestial figure and this is when this nymph inspires the poet, pushing him toward poetic creation, as Hosseini adroitly maintains, “this nymph or celestial figure is an immortal who is leading the poet to the everlasting truth” (231). His poem, being objectively dramatic, does not apostrophize the concept of Anima, and there is no evidence with which one can call the celestial woman as being the mistress to Sepehri, because of the spiritual, celestial, and immortal entity in this poem. Consequently, these descriptions are great examples of Barthes’ idea of impersonality of author or Tajrid as it is called in Persian literature. He associates the poet’s quest for ultimate harmony of the actual beauties of this world with ideal beauty. The poet is in his pursuit of ideal beauty in order to be immortal, because immortality is one of the qualities that human being has been longing for throughout history. That is why Sepehri says:

Speak, O primitive nocturnal nymph of speech!  
Under the very emotional boughs of wind,  
Give in my childhood, to me.

Amid these black always.  
Speak, O colorful sister of perfection!  
Fill my veins with softness of intelligence.  
Reveal my pulse on roughness of love's breath. (6-12)

One can say that only egoless, sensitive and receptive senses are required for the poem's perception. It is only the beauty that is omnipresent in the world of space and time, and such a beauty moves towards beauty in any movement. This turns the succession of time, itself, into a stillness of eternity. This poem is somehow saturated with idea of the term "Empathy". Gray believes that "it is a literary term coined by Fitchenner to suggest the artist's sympathetic imagination, the capacity to forget one's own personality and enter imaginatively into the objective existence of others and other kinds of existence"(Gray 72). In a thoroughly absorbed contemplation, Sepehri establishes a complete identification with the female figure by annihilating his own personality and undergoing what is called an inner mimicry. All these illustrations are intended to mark Sepehri's sense of beauty, art, and impersonality in artistic creation.

It is conceived that the sense of painting shares dramatic manifestations revealing in Sepehri's "The Water's Footsteps" as he says:

I am from Kashan.  
I'm a painter.  
Sometimes I make a cage out of colors, sell to you  
For the song of corn poppy which is confined in the cage  
Refreshes your bereft solitude. (25-29)

From the beginning of the poem Sepehri confesses his job as a painter of life around him, while in the following parts, the painting embodies as "a cage of colors". In another sense, the boundary between human and non human is transgressed, hence the corn poppy of the poem is in the cage singing the songs that refreshes one's bereft solitude, and these sentences are conceived to be objective correlative through which the poet depersonalizes himself. The other part of the poem, "a cage of colors" is bound up with the fixed entity of painting (a bird) which is not living any more. For this reason, the singing corn poppy of the cage refreshes "your bereft solitude", since corn poppy is humanized reminding the reader's bereavement. Here it can be articulated that Sepehri tends to dramatize most of his poetry by personifying the human and non-human entities. In the next line, he puts mark on this idea in the same poem, and he assures,

How fancy, how fancy ...  
I know  
My tableau is lifeless.  
I know well, my painting pool is devoid of fish. (30-33)

Here, despite all his struggles, the poet confesses that he is not able to give life to his painting, since it is bereft of a fish standing as a symbol of life. Kermani says that “fish is a Zoroastrian symbol and a component of Haft Sin, a group of seven entities initially starting with the letter ‘S’ set on a table at New Year time in Iran”(156). Sepehri’s vocations continue to impress his readers through its objectivity and impersonality; to give it more vital growth one can refer to another poem by him “An Oasis in a Moment” in which he says:

If you come to me,  
I’m beyond nothingness  
Beyond nothingness is a place.  
Beyond the nothingness of the air veins,  
Dandelions abound, bringing news  
From the blossoming flower at the farthest patch of land. (1-6)

The underlying issue about the above lines must be understood in wider form than its present. As Hosseyni points out “the poet impersonalizes himself to become one with nothingness, where, there is no trace of industrialization, the dandelions of the poem call people; and, this can be the poet’s utopia”(231). In another poem entitled “Presence till Infinity” Sepehri says:

Tonight  
The gate of a strange dream  
Will open,  
Toward words. (1-4)

In the above lines, there is a strange sense in the words; they actually wait to be uttered, because they are in the timelessness and spacelessness. In this sense, Barthes says:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or

its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work. (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* 147)

It is of significance to note that, what Sepehri and Barthes suggest is very similar in essence. Sepehri believes that words wait to be uttered out of space and time minus any author, and Barthes also negates author, his society, time, and his place. There are only words which for Barthes are small units of sense or 'lexias', and Barthes aims "to show how they carry many different meanings simultaneously on different levels or in different codes" (*S/Z* 24). Therefore, there is only the text left alone with the reader. Regarding such idea, Vernan asserts:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of the being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all traces by which the written text is constituted. (99)

Here the emphasis is on the impersonality of the text, and the unique role of the reader in shaping the meaning of the text is highlighted and appreciated. Sepehri, too, appreciates such concepts in the same poem, hence he says:

A friend's breeze will vibrate  
The stem of meaning,  
And wonder will tear away. (19-21)

By associating the meaning to a flower, Sepehri asks the breeze to vibrate the stem of meaning, until the wonder (ambiguity) is resolved. Therefore, Sepehri, like Barthes, puts emphasis on the process of signification and interpretation that falls in the territory of readership when the author's connection to his product does not exist any longer.

While one of the metaphysical concepts prevalent among most of the Romantic poets is the idea of reconciliation between the creative potentiality and youth, it is the creative power which makes the artist lose his intensity as he gets mature by the passage of time. Therefore, Romantic poets had necromantic desire mixed with their creative potentialities, and their premature death is the satiation of this enflaming desire. By placing such a personal face on such a distant and inconceivable end, Sepehri manages to approach his questions and thoughts about death in a more concrete manner. Here, by personifying death, the poet, introduces a stylistic manner

that pervades much of his works.

This study emphasizes the manifestation of Barthes' objectivity or the death of the author in some of Sepehri's poems. The findings show that Sepehri's idea of objectivity and impersonality paves the way for Kadkani's Tajrid. This idea is based on impersonality of the poet in which something other than personal emotion exists. Sepehri's tendency for immortality wears the gown of female figure and his dramatic technique reveals the poet's wish for immortality. As stated before, dramatizing one's vocations, as incorporated in the works of the poet, is a way of objectifying the world around their perceptions, the application of which was demonstrated in Sepehri's pictorial poetry. On the other hand, craving for death appears in the personification of death in Sepehri's "Traveler" and "The Water's Footfall" through objective representation. It can be claimed incontrovertibly that he either tries to give objects of feeling, not the feeling itself, or he sympathizes with the observed objects, thereafter, converting it to empathy, and consequently putting himself in those objects. In his poems, he tends to glean and dramatize the worldly pictures around him, and this aptly foregrounds Barthes' impersonality of author in its real sense. It seems that the hidden spring of action often lies in his thought and imagination which sometimes become as vivid and powerful as to qualify for deception as the drama of interior.

### Note

1. The quoted verses in the text are referred to according to their line number.

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