

Translating Tomb Dwellers for USAmericans: What the Process of Translation
Reveals About Counter-Censorship Strategies Among Theatre Artists in Iran

by

Fatemeh Madani Sarbarani

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Approved April 2019 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Tamara Underiner, Co-Chair
Behrooz Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari, Co-Chair
Guillermo Reyes

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I translate and provide a critical analysis of the Iranian play, *Tomb Dwellers* (2009), by Hussein Kiyani. It was first staged after the contested presidential election in Iran in 2009 which brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad into power for a second term. The play depicts the socioeconomic situation of Iran and its relation to other countries, the situation of women and the working class during Ahmadinejad's two terms of presidency. *Tomb Dwellers* is written as a comedy, a genre more likely to make it past censors in Iran or other despotic countries. My research and translation project are sparked by questions that move in two directions simultaneously: one, toward understanding the sociopolitical context for theatre in Iran after the revolution of 1979; the other, toward the challenges of translating into English a play that stands as a social metaphor in its own historical context. Regarding the former, which forms the basis of my critical analysis, I explore the strategies artists have used to avoid the limitations imposed by the authorities. In making this play available to English-speaking readers at a time of political tension between Iran and the United States I offer to USAmerican audiences a more nuanced perspective of the way Iranian people feel about their government and its relation to other countries. This play is both timely and informative. Timely because of the tensions between the US and the Middle East. Informative because it represents the Iranian community and may serve to create a bridge between the two cultures. Translating and staging this play along with the critical analysis I am providing will

help American audiences and immigrants from other countries to know more about Iran in a creative and entertaining way.

To Loving Memory of My Sister,

Monirah (Asiah) Madani Sarbarani

1986-2017

&

My Beloved Grandmother,

Nana Hakimah

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I translate and provide a critical analysis of the Iranian play, *Tomb Dwellers* (2009), by Hussein Kiyani. It was first staged after the contested presidential election in Iran in 2009 which brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad into power for a second term. The play depicts the socioeconomic situation of Iran and its relation to other countries, the situation of women and the working class during Ahmadinejad's two terms of presidency. For a play to be staged in Iran, the director must get permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Of interest to me in this project are the strategies employed by the playwright and director to receive permission and circumvent the censorship at the time, given the play's pervasive critique of Iranian authority. While a straightforward critical analysis of the play in Persian would provide many insights about these strategies, I believe the process of translating it into English will both offer additional perspectives on the artistry and dramaturgy of the original, and the results will afford U.S. readers a unique point of entry into an important period of recent Iranian history.

This play has elements of comedy, a genre more likely to make it past censors in Iran or other despotic countries. As Oscar Wilde once suggested, "If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they will kill you." One of the ways Iranian directors circumvent the censorship is by directing plays that are not directly

about Iran — often foreign plays which are altered to become metaphorical of particular aspects of Iranian society or its politics. Two examples of comedies that originated elsewhere but which, when staged in Iran, prove critical of the Iranian government are Sławomir Mrożek and Dario Fo's plays, which are often staged in Iran. I have seen Dario Fo's allegorical monologue *The Story of the Tiger* at the City Theatre of Tehran. It was staged by Hadi A'amel after the election. This comic story takes place in China during the rule of Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975). In a scene where the main character meets with the governor, the Iranian actor, Mehdi Hashemi, deployed some gestures that for the Iranians familiar with those gestures it implied a comparison between the Chinese governor and some Iranian politicians.

It is harder for non-comical and directly critical plays to acquire necessary permissions. For example, some of the plays by the renowned Iranian playwright, Bahram Beyzayi¹ or even the 1964 Argentinian play *The Walls* by Griselda Gambaro, which I translated in 2008—never received permission from the government censors to be staged. *The Walls*, which anticipated the situation of people who were later disappeared in Argentina's Dirty Wars (1976-1983) was deemed inappropriate to be

¹ Bahram Beyzayi is a theatre and film scholar, playwright, and director who was an assistant professor of drama at the University of Tehran, but was (forcefully) retired. He has been teaching as a visiting professor of Persian Studies at Stanford University for over a decade.

staged at the time. However, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance assured the director that he might be able to stage the play in the future after the crisis is over.

Before deciding on *Tomb Dwellers*, I read many plays by Iranian playwrights such as Beyzayi, Muhammad Rahmanian, Gholam-Hussein Sa'edi, and Abbas Na'ibandian that I later learned were already translated into English by translators such as Soheil Parsa, Gisele Kapuscinski, Muhammad Ghanoonparvar, John Green etc. Muhammad Yaghoobi, a very well-known political playwright, sent me his manuscripts of *Dance of The Torn Papers* before I received *Tomb Dwellers* (finding this unpublished text and getting permission from the playwright took almost one year). Yaghoobi's plays have been welcomed inside and outside Iran. Some of his plays have been translated and staged abroad simply because he talks directly about the social and political issues of Iran. Others have not yet been translated, but I was unwilling to translate them because in my opinion they were much like Western plays and would not bring anything new to the American stage. Moreover, his characters are modern educated people from Tehran, speaking perfect Persian, or intellectual immigrants who have left the country during the time of crisis, and thereby do not well represent the diversity of perspectives and lived experiences throughout Iranian society.

In contrast, Hussein Kiyani's plays deploy a comic tone in their portrayal of a variety of perspectives and explore traditional and religious values, as well as

historical and social situations of Iran. *Tomb Dwellers*² (2009), *Neighbor of Agha*³ (2013), *Mashrooteh Banoo* (2012), and *All Children of Khanom Agha*⁴ (2010) are his best plays being staged in Iran. His audience consists of all kinds of people. The dialects he uses vary from classical Persian to some dialects from the west of Iran. His ideas are unique and exceptional. His language is symbolic, allegorical and metaphorical, allowing him to avoid censorship and to stage his plays in Iran.

In making this play available to English-speaking readers at a time of political tension between Iran and the United States I offer to USAmerican audiences a more nuanced perspective of the way Iranian people feel about their government and its relation to other countries. This play is both timely and informative. Timely because of the tensions between the US and the Middle East. Informative because it represents the Iranian community and may serve to create a bridge between the two cultures. This is the task of every translator, to connect two cultures (source and target). Translating and staging this play along with the critical analysis I am providing will

² *Ahle Ghobour*, اهل قبور

³ *hameh farzandane Khanom Agha*, همه فرزندان خانم آغا

⁴ *Hamsayeye Agha*, همسایه آقا

Provide the ground for the American audience and immigrants from other countries to know more about Iran in a creative and entertaining way.

Plot of the Play

Briefly, in the *Tomb Dwellers*, local builder Me'mar is hired by a contractor to dig twenty thousand graves for the dead of the enemy who might attack the country in the future. After Me'mar and his family are done with the graves, they ask the contractor to pay them. The contractor refuses to pay, using the pretext that the enemy hasn't yet attacked them and therefore he cannot use the graves. After the contractor pays with a sack of rotten potatoes, Me'mar and his family begin to strategize different ways of initiating the war. When the enemy still does not attack them, Me'mar and his family lay down to sleep in the graves and after a while they disappear.

Background and Themes of the Play

The play was staged right after the presidential election in 2009 which brought Ahmadinejad into power for the second time. Rather than directly criticizing the government, Kiyani uses various images to show the socioeconomic and political situation of Iran during Ahmadinejad's term, or during the Islamic Republic in general. Images like the imaginary enemy and the sack of potatoes respectively imply

the paranoia and pseudo-populism of Iranian government officials, about which Ervand Abrahamian and other scholars have written.

Abrahamian in *Khomeinism* discusses the conspiratorial interpretation of politics in Iran. He asserts:

Political polemics in Iran are replete with such terms as tuteah (plot), jasous (spy), khianat (treason), vabasteh (dependent), khatar-e kharejeh (foreign danger), ummal-e kharejeh (foreign hands), nafouz-e biganeh (alien influence), asrar (secrets), naqsheh (designs), arosak (marionette), sotun-e panjom (fifth column), nokaran-e estemar (servants of imperialism), posht-e pardeh (behind the curtain), and posht-e sahneh (behind the scene). (111)

Some of these words appear in the play as well, and certainly the conspiratorial tone, as will be seen in the translation at the core of this dissertation. Other concepts interrogated by the play are the situation of women and the plight of the working class in Iran. In November 2018, Iran Human Rights published an article regarding Protection of Women Against Violence's bill. This bill, originally begun seven years ago under Ahmadinejad, was drafted and sent to the judiciary by the Rouhani administration in early 2017 for review. The judiciary significantly removed 40 of the original 91 articles for not being compliant with Islamic law. Yet in October 2018, the legislation was sent to Qom for review by Shia religious leaders.

At the end of the play *Touti*, Bibi's adopted daughter, is sold to Latif, the loan shark, who is hired by the creditors to find Me'mar's family, reflecting Luce Irigaray and other feminist's critiques of the position of women as commodities who are exchanged in the patriarchal society. Like slaves, women are scarce commodities that are essential to the life of the community and their bodies (their use and circulation) provide the condition for making social and cultural life possible. They are objects of men's need and desire.

Like feminism, which is concerned with the gender inequality and repression of women, Marxism is concerned with class and economic inequality. Thus, "Marxism comes to insist not only on an abstract doctrine of fairness and justice, but also on the historically specific imbalance and inequality within capitalism" (J. Thompson, *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*). Karl Marx criticizes the way capitalism exploits and abuse the laborers. In the play different contractors come and go, and each time they ask for something new from Me'mar instead of paying him. In Iran under Ahmadinejad, who claimed Iran became a super power during his presidency, unemployment and inflation rose, which led to an increase of poverty of the middle class and the working class. Although Ahmadinejad took advantage of poor people by spreading money and food among them to get their votes, financial corruption, fraud and embezzlement of the executives and politicians deteriorated the lives of the ordinary people of all classes.

Research Questions

My research and translation project are sparked by questions that move in two directions simultaneously: one, toward understanding the sociopolitical context for theatre in Iran after the revolution of 1979; the other, toward the challenges of translating into English a play that stands as a social metaphor in its own historical context. Regarding the former, which forms the basis of my critical analysis, I am most interested in the exploring the strategies artists have used to avoid censorship in post-revolutionary Iran. My translation and analysis of the play will provide one set of answers to that question; my interviews with contemporary theatre artists in Iran another set of perspectives.

Questions for the translation project include:

1. *Which translation theories and strategies will best serve my aim to translate a play that so filled with metaphor, allusive language, and local symbolism?*
2. *Which is more important, readability or performability?*

Following these questions are a number of secondary questions that emerged in the course of my work, such as whether and if so where to re-situate the play's location and historical time period; how to find equivalents for slangs/metaphors/proverbs/allegory/irony/jokes, etc.; how to translate Iranian gestural

and facial expressions, etc. For that reason, working with English-speaking actors in a reading process became an essential aspect of my own translation practice. The answers to these questions and approaches I decided upon are described in more detail in Chapter Three, but I will say at the start that when I received the text from the playwright, his main concern was that the metaphoric language of the play might not be transferable into English. I promised him that I would try to keep the “spirit” of the Persian text as much as the target language and culture allows me. As a result, when I translated *Tomb Dwellers* I avoided Americanizing the names, customs, idioms, and specific expressions, giving priority to the source culture as much as possible.

Theory and Methodology

My principal methodology for the critical analysis is a close reading of the play, in conversation with critical works on Iranian history, political discourse, and limits on artistic expression, including Ervand Abrahamian, Nayereh Tohidi, Ali Ansari and Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, among others. Arguing that Iranian playwrights apply metaphorical and figurative language strategically to escape censorship, I discuss the mechanisms that both challenge and make possible the staging of plays like *Tomb Dwellers* in Iran and the U.S. today. In considering the particular themes of this play, my analysis also adopts a feminist/Marxist lens, as I suggested above.

Additionally, I consider the theories of four major translation scholars: André Lefevere, Patrice Pavis, Anne Ubersfeld, and Susan Bassnett, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three. In the course of my translation work, I supplemented these theoretical approaches with workshops using MFA students of acting and directing, as well as scene readings in various other settings, particularly of scene seven.

Structure of Project

This project consists of four major chapters and a conclusion. Following Chapter One's Introduction, Chapter Two focuses on the history of the modern theatre in Iran and censorship. I interviewed several playwrights and directors, many of whom were reluctant to say their plays have been critical of the government and socio-economical situations of Iran. I also discuss the history of theatre censorship which started from Qajar dynasty of the 19th century.

Chapter Three focuses on the theories and techniques of the theatrical translation I mention briefly above. I also explain what approaches I took in the translation of the *Tomb Dwellers* with actors and directors here at ASU, as well as with other live readers of the translation in process.

Chapter Four is the translation of the play, which was read and examined by my professors at Arizona State University and the University of Tehran, my students

in a Middle Eastern drama class, and translation students at a translation workshop I took in the English department at Arizona State University.

Chapter Five focuses on the analysis of the play. In this chapter I examine the symbols and metaphors Hussein Kiyani uses to depict the socio-economic situation of Iran during the Ahmadinejad administration. Moreover, I analyze the play from Feminist and Marxist points of views and the notions of women as commodity and the working class who have always been oppressed by power.

The Reason I Chose This Play

After the election of June 2009, many plays were staged that criticized the Iranian government through creating comic situations. The reason would be that the government was in transition and it was a chance for the directors to produce their plays without worrying about the government officials interrupting the shows.

One of my friends invited me to go and see *Tomb Dwellers* with him. First, because the director, who was one of his friends, invited him and secondly, because it was well received by the audience. War is tragic and out of it, the playwright, in my opinion, created a dark comedy. I remembered how the comic tone made the audience laugh and sometimes clap. After the show nobody talked about the political parts, as if it was a taboo. As a theatre student, I didn't want to inform people of the message of the play and the metaphors because I was not sure which person was a leftist and which one was supporter of the government. As I remember people were silent. They

were waiting to go out of the salon and talk in their privacy. (Sometimes in my experience someone in the audience unknowingly reveals the message and the government bans the play.) On one hand, what is clear in this play is poverty, depression and war. On the other hand, the playwright shows how politicians manipulate people and impose their ideology on them. It was written during the time Ahmadinejad was elected and he was a populist gathering poor people around him by giving them food and talking about the threat of the imaginary enemy, by which he means the West.

In my childhood death was something inevitable. I used to see bodies of the martyrs being brought back from the front zone. My grandmother took me with her to identify the dead. People gathered around the bodies and I was standing on the corner and watching them. Whenever I wanted to get closer and watch, they would push me back. It was like a children's game. It was comedy for me. Death was very close. The war between Iraq and Iran of 1980-88 resulted in great loss of life and property. My hometown was in the middle of the one of the most strategic straits in the world, the Strait of Hormuz.

Part of the reason I chose this play is the absurdity of living in the graveyards. There were shelters everywhere in case the enemy attacked us. Every Thursday, people used to go to the graveyard to pray for the dead and I was playing with other kids among the graves. I identify myself with the characters. Graveyards remind me

of the bodies brought to the island and buried in a specific cemetery. Its setting, like my hometown, is on the border close to the enemy's country. They anticipated a war and digging graves for the soldiers. There are graves ready for the bodies in Iran and one has to pay for it in advance to make sure they have a place after their death. Like in the play, people in Iran lived in poverty during the Iran-Iraq war. Like in the play, when characters sleep in the graves, people had shelters to go and hide during bombardments. Seyed Habiballah Lazgee points out:

Preparation to send the young to the front, the tears of women and children, victory and happiness, loss and captivity, to fail and mourn, and to bury... these were the important themes and the deep meanings of life in the war, which were not reflected in theatre as well as they could have been. (15)

As I mentioned above, not many Iranian plays have been translated into English. And those that were translated were written by well-known playwrights such as Bahram Beyzayi and Gholam-Hussein Sa'edi. One reason that it is hard to find a publisher willing to support Persian translators and publish Iranian plays may be because those playwrights are not known to the target audience. Therefore, publishing these plays is a risk for them: people do not buy plays whose author aren't known to them. I chose Kiyani's play because nobody has introduced him in the United States before. His works have not been translated and published into other languages and I was so fascinated by *Tomb Dwellers* that I decided to be the first one to translate it. It

took me one year to get the author's permission to translate his work, and the reason for him was I am a young student and a new translator, and the fact that the play is metaphorical and it is hard to transfer that into another language. However, he let me do that as a student project, which would be staged at ASU (if at all) and not in a more public venue.

Every play changes during staging and even before that. Even the published version might be different from the staged one. The copy I have was sent in the format of .pdf, and I do not know how close it is to the published one, as the Persian version is not out yet. Obviously, my task as a translator is not limited to this project. Each translation is a project in progress; i.e. it is never finished. The more one learns about different cultures and languages, the more he/she gains knowledge and experience and can improve his/her work. Through this project, I hope to make American audiences aware of the creativity of the Iranian theatre practitioners and techniques they use to produce their plays.

CHAPTER 2: MODERN THEATRE IN IRAN

Although Western theatre in Iran is a relatively new phenomenon, traditional performance forms such as Marionette Play (Kheymeh Shab Bazi), storytelling, and *Ta'ziyeh*⁵ have respectively been practiced both for public entertainment and ritual purposes. Perhaps the most well-known form of traditional rituals in Iran is the *Ta'ziyeh*, a dramatic Shi'ite religious spectacle that commemorates the death of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the prophet Muhammad.

⁵ Refer, for example, to Chelkowsky, Malekpour, and Anasory

Western theatre, with its Aristotelian notions of plot, character, etc., didn't arrive until relatively recently, and that according to most scholars⁶ started with the translation and adaptation of Moliere's plays such as *Le Misanthrope* by Mirza Habib Esfahani and *Le Medicin Malgré Lui* by Muhammad Hasan Khan in 1886. According to Willem Floor, the following factors play important roles in the emergence of Western theatre in Iran:

- The murder of Alexander Griboydov (1795-1829), the Russian playwright and minister while visiting Iran in 1829. In 1829 a committee was sent to Russia for reconciliation. Among them were Mirza Taqhi (the translator) and Amir Kabir, later Prime Minister of Nasir al-Din Shah, king of Iran from the Qajar dynasty (r 1848-1896). In his travelogue, Amir Kabir wrote about his familiarity with the Russian theatre.
- Nasir al-Din Shah (r 1848 to 1896), visited and attended Comédie Française opera house in 1873. Upon his return he decided to build a similar theatre house in Dar al-Fonun, Polytechnic School built by Amir Kabir in 1851.

⁶ For a comprehensive history of Western-style theatre in Iran, consult Willema Floor, Bahram Beyzayi, Muhammad Faique and Mansour Khalaj

- The Constitutional Revolution (1906) during Mozaffar al-Din Shah (r 1896-1907) which brought freedom of speech to the newspapers and the artists. Writers promoted “socio-economical and cultural development” among the population.
- The occupation of Iran by Allied forces in 1941 made people more familiar with Western culture.
- Iranian students’ travel to Europe to study.

Mirza Fath Ali Akhond Zadeh wrote the first play in the Azari Turkish language, which was translated into Persian by Mirza Ja’far Gharacheh-Daghi in 1882. Between 1850 and 1856, Akhond Zadeh wrote six comedies that influenced other playwrights and they started writing plays based on his style. With the improvement of the theatre, censorship began to be exercised by the court, the clergy and unofficial groups who had influence over both. As early as 1879, the capital adopted a code developed by an Italian officer, the Conte de Monte Forte, better known as the Conte, who served as Tehran’s first police officer. “Under the Conte’s code, the publication of books and newspapers found offensive to the religion, nation, the monarch and the government was punishable by imprisonment” (Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*). This practice has continued until the present.

Reza Khan, first king of the Pahlavi dynasty from 1925 to 1941, was influenced by the West, and began to modernize Iran. He discouraged the practice of the *Ta’ziyeh*, a mourning play and other rites, particularly in their extreme and morbid

forms (Muhammad Faique 77). Playwrights started writing about modern life and the importance of education and independence, and critiqued ignorance and superstition. However, in 1931 a vaguely worded law was enacted against “collectivist ideologies,” which further restricted the expression and propagation of ideas deemed incompatible with the official policies of the state. Among the banned subjects were “attacks on the royal family, printing false news, revealing military secrets, publishing material injurious to Islam, or printing of obscene material” (Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*).

In 1941 Allied forces brought Muhammad Reza Shah, Reza Khan’s son, into power. Iran went into political and economical chaos. As Floor mentions:

The entry of Allied troops brought a period of political and economic upheaval and released many suppressed feelings and political grievances. Leftist groups sprang up and the Iran communist party with the Soviet support gained strength through the discontent of people. (77)

The government started checking the playhouses, arresting and banning directors such as Abdul Hussain Nushin who used the stage to criticize the government.

In the 1950s and 60s, the development of radio and television, the establishment of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, drama schools and the Rudaki opera house, and the yearly Festival of Arts, gave theatre practitioners the opportunity

to improve their work. These state-supported works featured themes that were patriotic and psychologically realistic in style.

However, many playwrights and writers continued criticizing the government. In 1957, SAVAK, the Organization of State Security and Information, was founded. SAVAK monitored the work of Persian press, the book industry and social media. The performances were interrupted and the intellectuals were suppressed, imprisoned and executed. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak points out:

It proved less easy to censor books, especially collections of poetry, fiction, and drama. Modern Persian writers, who were very much concerned about social events, were by this time at the center of the opposition. Through the use of a strong vocabulary of light and darkness, of good and evil, and of right and wrong they described the social scene as a wasteland and the state as an intolerable obstacle on the path to freedom and human fulfillment. However, they also more and more used a symbolic language that made it hard for the state to put its finger on banned expressions. (*Encyclopaedia Iranica*)

Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, Shah of Iran before the revolution, tried to modernize Iran through what is called the “White Revolution” in 1963. Theatre and cinema in Iran were Westernized (i.e. drinking, nudity, sex were allowed and women took important roles). That is why they were rejected by the Islamic Republic which came into power after the revolution of 1979. These were more conservative Iranians

who were against the Shah's "White Revolution" which gave women freedom, a right to vote and education. For the same reason, in the beginning of the Islamic regime movies by famous Iranian directors such as, Massoud Kimiayi, Ali Hatami and Bahram Beyzayi, whose work was screened in the Fajr International Film Festival, were banned in Iran. In 1998, during the screening of *Haji Washington* by Hatami people protested saying "death to Hatami." The modern Iranian directors who worked during Shah period were excluded and rejected.

An extended example of the play-turned-film, *Death of Yazdgerd* by Bahram Beyzayi will illustrate how modern filmmakers addressed their concern for contemporary Iran, and why they were censored. According to Majid Laki Sahlavani, Beyzayi's *Death of Yazdgerd* is a play about exclusion, is about a discourse that is rejected and a new discourse that is being constructed ("Why Is Bahram Beyzayi's *Death of Yazdgerd* Still Controversial?"). At the time of the play's action, Iraq has attacked Iran after the Shah left and there was nothing left except for a desolated mill, commanders and a body on the ground. In Beyzayi's plays and films women are the main characters. They are independent and dominant. That was not accepted by the traditional religious authorities. Sahlavani asserts that another reason for banning *Death of Yazdgerd* (last king of the Sasanid dynasty) was due to dialogues that insulted Muslims and their beliefs. For example, in Soheil Parsa's translation of the play we have:

SOLDIER: Good news, Commander. Fortune's with us. Our scouts have captured one of the invaders. He is bleeding, half-dead.

CHIEF COMMANDER: One of the invaders?

SOLDIER: Their swords are curved like the moon and their costumes made of camel's wool. And look a lace!

CHIEF COMMANDER: What kind of man is he?

SOLDIER: Stubborn, hungry and desperate.

CHIEF COMMANDER: Then give him some bread and whip him 'til he speaks. Ask him how many troops they are, where they are and what they are up to. Are they riding or on foot? Do they want to stay or go? Why is he here? Is he a messenger or spy? Why do they burn and destroy everything? Why do they wear black? And the God they are speaking of – why is he so angry?

And at the end we have:

CORPORAL (running in): We've been here haunted by death all this time without knowing it. The judgment hasn't ended yet. Behold the real judges are coming. There's a sea of troops out there. They don't greet; neither ask anything nor listen. They speak with their swords.

WOMAN: Yes, now the real judges are here. You and your white flag gave us this sentence. Let's wait for the verdict of this black one.

Death of Yazdgerd was produced by Iranian TV and Radio and was shown for the first time in the Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran in 1982. After 32 years, this movie has still not been able to receive a screening permit for general viewing

within Iran. This movie has been shelved due to the fact that it is not in accordance with the Islamic code currently in use in Iranian motion picture industry. The play was staged in 1979 while the female actors did not have hijab.

In this particular play, Beyzayi unfolds the history “created” by power and re-narrates it from the perspective of dispossessed/subordinate people. He also deconstructs the norm by bringing a female character narrating the history that has always been defined by men. In the final scene we hear the message of the playwright when the Private says “history is written by the victorious.”

Western theatre entered Iran through the translation of the foreign works. Playwrights started writing plays in Western style and gradually began using the stage for criticizing the monarchy and clergy. As a result, Iranian theatre has been subject to scrutiny and censorship ever since.

Censorship Today

Maria Tymoczko warns that a translator needs to select and interpret the text in a way that he/she does not jeopardize the life of the author. Given the high stakes I’ve sketched above, I had reason to take her warning seriously. When I was interviewing the directors and playwrights in Iran all of them asked me not to mention their names. One of them, who directed an adaptation of *Hamlet* in 2017, insisted that the work

was not political and did not address contemporary Iran, though for me it strongly seemed to. He said that it was his own interpretation and he didn't intend it to be political. That's why for Tymoczko the process of selectivity and interpretation is ideological. This makes my work difficult. On one hand, I'm writing about censorship in Iran, on the other hand, I am censoring my own work. If the playwrights I interviewed were living abroad it would be easier for me to analyze their works freely.

On May 16th, 2017, I interviewed a director, who said during one of his productions, three men from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance came to the City Theatre and wanted to review the show before the public performance. It happened while the play had been staged before and they had already approved the text, after getting permission from the Center for Performing Art (Centre of Dramatic Arts) which is affiliated with Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The play was partially about *Ta'ziyeh* and there was a musician playing Sitar, the traditional Iranian instrument. The Ministry officials opposed using the Sitar in a religious play. Finally, an idea came to his mind and he put the Sitar player behind the curtain and the sound of Sitar was mixed with other instruments on stage.

In another play called *The Illusion of a Kiss*, one of the actors, a woman, shaved her hair. In the poster of the play, the bald woman was in the front and another woman was in the background. The composition was done in a way to suggest they

were kissing each other. The image was published in the newspaper and it reached the parliament and the play was banned from going on stage anymore, even though the title of the play was *The Illusion of a Kiss*.

During the presidency of Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005), a reformist, censorship was based on the law and closing the theatres was not an easy job. During Ahmadinejad, the fundamentalist president, censorship was based on religion and it was more based on the personal attitudes of the censors. During the process of staging a play, sometimes directors give up and censor his/her own play and sometimes the censor officials do it. Because there are not any rules and regulation for censorship, it caused self-censorship among artists.

For this playwright/ director, in three ways we can escape censorship:

1. Using techniques that hide the main message for the censor officials and at the same time allow the audience to get the messages. For example, through dialogues and gestures, there are two kinds of signs: in one signified that is obvious to all and in the other signified that is known only for the audience. For example, the color green in Islam signifies purity and holy people and at the same it refers to the reformist candidate Mir Hussein Mousavi who is under house arrest.

2. The censor official is a theatre practitioner and he does not believe in censorship over certain things, for example, using words that refers to sex and sexual activity.
3. Through symbolism, metaphor and allegory. Telling a story that in fact refers to the social situation through symbols (although sometimes the officials can figure it out and they stop the show or warn the director).

Critique of the organizations that people elect, like the government, is acceptable during reformist regimes. If the criticism attacks religious people like clergy, however, it is not acceptable.

At the end, he said as a director he knows what the red line (the borderline between acceptable and non-acceptable) is, and he avoids censorship by not talking about topics such as sex, religion and politics.

At first, the playwright/director of *Hamlet* was reluctant to give an interview. After I persisted he answered some questions which didn't make me happy. In his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* I noticed a lot of references to today's socio-political situation in Iran. For example, Polonius (Ophelia's father) was characterized as an official who spent his time censoring newspaper articles on history, art, and one in particular headlined "the way to reform." The playwright/director said he didn't intend to criticize the society, and besides, censorship existed during Queen Elizabeth's time in England too. He insisted that the setting was Denmark and the

play had nothing to do with Iran and today's situations. According to him, the censorship officials asked him to omit the parts where Ophelia is singing because singing by women is forbidden in Islam. He had to ask other actors to sing along with Ophelia so that the song became homophonic. He said he resisted against censoring the second song because there was no way he could omit the scene.

He said in two ways the playwright can escape censorship:

1. Fantasy characters
2. Going back to the past, and old tales

At the end, he said "I know what is forbidden and I avoid it."

In his interview with the Journalismisnotacrime website, Muhammad Rahmanian said in his play titled *To Smoke, or To Not Smoke* the censorship officials at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance cut 60 pages out of 100. He mentioned he proposed two screenplays to the Ministry of Culture but they rejected them. He said he wouldn't give up because the ministry's clerks always change and maybe one day he will get the permission. He asserted that he would never give up.

In "Post-revolutionary Theatre: Three Representative Iranian Plays in Translation with Critical Commentary," Lazgee asserts:

However, within the Centre of Dramatic Arts of the Ministry of Culture and

Islamic Guidance, the responsibility for the control of theatre was given to a handful of people and those individuals with authority to censor have changed many times and each has judged from their personal tastes. Theatre censorship is in two parts, first of the text and then the performance, and usually these points are more important:

For the text:

- It must not be anti-Islam.
- It must not be communistic.
- It must not contain sexual relationships or indecent words
- It must satisfy the artistic judgment of the censor.

For the performance:

- There must not be physical contact between men and women.

The body and the hair of the actresses must be concealed and no tight dresses are allowed.

- There should be no dance or pop music.
- It must satisfy the artistic judgment of the censor. (19)

Muhammad Yaghoobi has recently emigrated to Canada; in his interview with BBC Persian he asserts that Iranian playwrights aim to write absurd plays in order not

to show the place of the actions so that the officials couldn't guess that the play is about Iran. Another technique is to write about the past. In the *Dance of Torn Papers* and *Drought and Lies* instead of the problematic terms and actions (according to the officials) he makes a smart move and uses the number 25: instead of cursing or using words, such as "sex" or "girlfriend," because it is forbidden to have relationship outside of marriage, the characters say "25." Yaghoobi, who studied Law at the university, explains that according to Act 25 of the Iranian Law, censorship is forbidden; however, it still is practiced by the government.

CHAPTER 3: TRANSLATION THEORY AND PRACTICE

Theatrical translation studies started in the mid-1970s, but it was only in the 1990s that it came into its own as a field. Theatre has been one of the most neglected areas in translation studies. The main reason is because it has become common practice to translate dramatic texts in the same way as prose texts. In “Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre,” Susan Bassnett asserts:

The labyrinthine difficulties of describing and analyzing what takes place when a playtext is transposed from one language into another and performed in that second language extend the problematics of the relationship between play and performance much further and compound the problems. (90)

In theatre, even without a language difference, we often speak in everyday terms of there being some level of translation at work: e.g., when you perform a script you are “translating” that into a show. This suggests there must be a semantic equivalence between the written text and its performance and we are somehow able to transfer a linguistic sign system to a system of performance signs.

Ubersfeld and Bassnett, however, argue against this notion. For them, this means that there is only one way of reading text and to consider the text higher than the performance. If so, Bassnett argues in *Translation Studies*, “then the translator would be bound to a rigid preconceived model of translation and should be judged

according to how "faithful" to or deviant from the written text his or her translation is" (121). If a theatre text must be read differently from a strictly written text, it raises the question of whether the theatre translator translates the playtext as a literary text or he or she has to translate it with respect to its function within the complex system of the spectacle.

In this chapter, I survey the various theoretical approaches to theatrical translation I found most useful in undertaking my own, focusing particularly but not exclusively on the work of Ubersfeld and Bassnet. I also describe how these approaches affected various choices I made in the actual work of translating *Tomb Dwellers*.

The emergence of cultural studies influenced translation studies in the 1980s. The aim of cultural studies is to examine cultural practices and their relation to power. Instead of focusing on the source text and considering translation a servile, cultural studies "drew attention to the issues that are beyond equivalence and fidelity, namely history, culture, ideology and poetics" (Shuping 55). Among all the introduced theories at that time, as Shuping asserts:

Lefevere's theory of rewritings was a prominent one. It focused more on the differences between source and target texts as well as issues such as culture and ideology. It helped translation researchers expand their horizons from the linguistic level to a wider social context (55).

It helped translation researchers expand their horizons from the linguistic level to a wider social context. In his *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook*, Lefevere argues that translations are not made in a vacuum, for they are undertaken in the service of power. For Lefevere translation involves factors such as power, ideology, poetics, patronage, and universe of discourse. Translation takes the forms of rewriting, since it is performed under certain constraints and for certain purposes. In *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, Bassnett and Lefevere argue that while in every case, translation is a rewriting of an original text, the reasons for rewriting will vary: they can be ideological (conforming to or rebelling against the dominant ideology) or poetological (conforming to or rebelling against the dominant/preferred poetics) (Munday 128). One of the rewriting strategies for translation is “refraction,” which is defined as “the adaption of a work of literature to a different audience” (Lefevere 205) or adaption to a certain poetics or a certain ideology.

For theatre translation in particular, the question of the performability vs. readability is an important one.

Performability

The theatre translator must meet two criteria more than the translator of prose or poetry (Ubersfeld, Bassnett and Patrice Pavis): the first criterion is that

of performability or playability, and the second is that of the function of the text itself. Ubersfeld argues that the linguistic system is only one of a set of interrelated systems that comprise the spectacle. Summarizing Ubersfeld's argument in *Lire le théâtre* (Reading Theatre), Ekaterini Nikolarea writes:

Ubersfeld calls our attention to two important points: first, that any notion of theater must see written text and performance as indissolubly linked; and second, that the written text is incomplete (“troué”) in itself. Starting with the premise that theater consists of the dialectical relationship between text and performance, she argues that it is impossible to separate the two, and points out how an artificial distinction between the two has led to the preeminence of the written text. (“Performability versus Readability”)

Performability presupposes that the theatre text contains within its structure some features that make it performable: a coded gestural patterning, or the gestic text. Joanne Pottlitzer asserts, “I believe that in theatre a translation is never finished until you hear it coming out of the mouths of the actors. However well it sounds to a translator on paper, if an actor cannot get his tongue around a word or phrase, it is not workable on stage” (103).

According to Bassnett, the translator must determine which structures are performable and translate them into the target language—even though major linguistic and stylistic changes may occur. This is, of course, something different

from what the translator of other types of text does. However, the theatre translator needs to consider another side of performability: its continual change. Since performance is determined by the various developments in acting style, playing space, the role of the audience, the national and cultural context, the translator has to consider time and place as variables in the changing concept of performance.

Nikolarea again:

In other words, continues Bassnett, the theater translator must consider the performance aspect of the written text (its gestural patterning) as well as its relationship to its contemporary audience. Yet the presence of the audience itself indicates that the function of theater transcends the strictly linguistic level and reveals the public dimension of the challenges a theater translator faces. (“Performability versus Readability”)

For Lefevere, translation happens on a level different from linguistic level. Something more than language which he calls textual and conceptional grids. Both grids are the result of socializing process and are intertwined. He asserts: “Problems in translating are caused at least as much by discrepancies in conceptual and textual grids as by discrepancies in languages” (76). According to him this fact is obvious when we translate from Western to non-Western culture and vice versa. When we are dealing with those two grids we need to consider two consequences. One of the consequences, as Lefevere mentions, is related to the translator and the writer of the

original culture. Not only the translator but also the writer of the original is faced with these two grids and both of them have to manipulate those grids with their creativity and make the text or as Lefevre calls “communication” more interesting and clearer to the receiver by means of introductions, the detailed analysis of selected texts which is what I do for this project.

The second consequence is related to the reader. Lefevre points out: “the grids, in their interplay, may well determine how reality is constructed for the reader, not just of the translation, but also of the original” (77). For instance, in the play I translated for this project the textual grid or the text type is dark comedy in fourteen acts. The conceptual grid would be socio-economic situation of Iran and absurdity of life.

Pavis believes that the translation cannot preserve the original situation because it is intended for a future situation of enunciation, a situation the translator may not be familiar with at all:

The source text’s situation of enunciation is a part of the source culture. Once this text (in its translated form) is staged for the target audience and culture, it is itself surrounded by a situation of enunciation belonging to the target culture...The real situation of enunciation (that of the translated text in its situation of reception) is a transaction between the source and target situations

of enunciation that may glance at the source, but that has its eye chiefly on the target.” (26)

In another words, in order to make the text readable we have to make it invisible or “available for concretization on stage by the audience” (Pavis 28). This is what Jean Graham-Jones calls “accessibility,” i.e. to make the text accessible to the audience.

A translator needs to know theatre or (maybe) to be trained as a playwright and a dramaturge. The dramaturgical analysis of the translation process “must incorporate a coherent reading of the plot as well as the spatio-temporal indications contained in the text, the transfer of stage directions, whether by way of linguistic translation or by representing them through the *mise en scene*’s extralinguistic elements” (Pavis 28) i.e. having good theatre production knowledge. The most important aspect of this step of the translation process is the process of concretization (from fictionalization and ideologization) that the dramaturge effects on the text. Theatre translation theorist/practitioner Phyllis Zatlin agrees with this approach, expecting translators to work with the actors through the rehearsal process like a dramaturge. She agrees with Skerritt Zuber that the translator, like the playwright, should write for the actors and improve the script through rehearsal and then publish it (Zatlin 4). This is, essentially, the process I followed to the extent possible, given my circumstances.

For Pavis, the theatre translation is a hermeneutic act and the translator has to bombard the source text with questions to know what it means. He asserts:

this hermeneutic act— interpreting the source text— consists of delineating several lines translating into another language, in order to pull the foreign text toward the target culture and language, so as to separate it from its source and origin. (26-7)

The translator's main task is not finding the semantic equivalence of two texts but rather the "appropriation" of a source by a target text/ culture. He proposes a "compromise between two cultures and producing a translation that would be a "conductor" between the two cultures and which would cope with proximity as well as distance" (38). Schechner's concept of interculturalism would be a good example here. According to Schechner, interculturalism means to preserve the identity of the source culture, while creating a new intercultural experience, i.e. "creating a transmission of both cultures, or an amalgamation of the two" (167).

Pavis brings up the issue of *mise en scène* meaning the stage action takes precedence over the linguistics. In "Problems of Translating for the Stage: Interculturalism and Post-Modern Theatre," he sees the translation as a dramaturgical analysis, a *mise en scène*, and a message to the audience. He points out that an entire deictic system is the link between the translation already inserted in a concrete *mise*

en scène and the theatrical situation of enunciation. He asserts: in theatrical translation we need to take account of two factors:

1. In the theatre, the translation reaches the audience by way of the actors' bodies.
2. We cannot simply translate a text linguistically; rather we confront and communicate heterogeneous cultures and situations of enunciation that are separated in space and time. (25)

Pavis also believes in the gestural universality and inter-gestural dynamics, i.e. a real harmonization of gestural moments despite the diversity of their ethnic and national origins (40). Performability is today's chosen priority criterion in translations of dramatic texts and principally involves what Lawrence Venuti calls "domestication" i.e. making the strange familiar.

Readability

Another approach to theatrical translation is "readability." In the mid-1980s, Bassnett's position toward the theatrical translation changed drastically. In her article "Still Trapped in the Labyrinth: Further Reflections on Translation and Theatre," she calls performability "a term that has no credibility because it is resistant to any form of definition" (95). For Bassnett, the text is not fundamental to performance but is

merely one element in an eventual performance. Moreover, in “Ways through the Labyrinth: Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts,” she disregards her own previous position, acknowledging the translator's need to consider the gestural language that are discernible within the written text. She asserts

How can there ever be any certainty about whether the inner text decoded by actors in the source culture will be the same as that decoded in the target culture? Theatre is not consistent, conventions vary radically from culture to culture. Stanislavski's reading of Othello, for example, where he suggests that Desdemona deserved a slap from her husband for interfering, would be deemed unacceptably sexist today. (92)

Bassnett believes that the translator, like the playwright, should not be concerned with the integration of the written text into the other sign systems, because this is the task of the directors and the actors. Theatre is a collaborative process, and a group of different people with different skills work together on the different sign systems. For her, it does not make sense to expect a translator not only to decode paralinguistic and kinetic signs in the source language, but also to re-encode them in the target language. She asserts that “[t]o do such a thing a translator would not only have to know both languages and theatrical systems intimately, but would also have to have experience of gestic readings and training as a performer or director in those two systems” (92).

However, like Zatlin above, she points out that the ideal situation is when a translator collaborates with the members of the team who put a playtext into performance. But if that does not happen then the translator should not be expected to produce a hypothetical performance text or to guess what actors might want to do with the text. She asserts “theories of acting, from Stanislavski through Brecht, have evolved the notion of the gestic text that is somehow encoded in the written and can then be deciphered by an actor” (92). She also rejects the idea of universality of the culture and gesture saying that cultural differences are accentuated by the presence of particulars. Instead of the universality of gestures and cultures, she firmly believes in the particularity of each culture and, therefore, in the particularity of gestures within cultures. Because gestures are culture-bound. She also rejects the idea of acculturation, using Chekhov as her example, where the acculturation process has domesticised the Russian writer, Chekhov, and shifted the focus away from the Russian-bound aspects of his work. “What we have, therefore, is not a Russian but an English Chekhov, or rather, an English middle-class Chekhov, and it is this playwright, invented through the translation process, whose work has entered the English literary system” (94). She says this in reaction to Michael Frayn’s speech in a debate on theatre translation at the Lyttleton Theatre in October 1989, when he declared that Chekhov is universal:

The good thing about Chekhov is that you don't need to know a word of Russian to be able to translate his plays because everyone knows what

Chekhov is about, everyone knows by some sort of inner certainty what Chekhov intended and what he was saying, and the idea of referring it to some original text is absolutely odious. (qtd. in Bassnett 93)

Bassnett point out that “multicultural” theatre deliberately rejects acculturation into the target system. Then she refers to the performance of *Mahabharata* by Peter Brook to illustrate her argument. In his preface to his translation of the *Mahabharata*, Jean Claude Carrière explains how he rejected what he saw as a “normalization” process, i.e. a deliberate Europeanizing of language, and opted not to translate certain words like *dharma* or *kshetrva*, because he recognized the inadequacies of the target language to convey certain ideas. But Carrière also warns against the risk of producing an esoteric language for a minority of initiated theatre specialists whose agenda is to keep the “exotic” theatre object at a distance. Richard Kearney also says: “Indeed, most attempts to instantiate an absolute universal language proved, in point of fact, to be thinly disguised imperial ploys to impose one particular language (French, English, Spanish, etc.) over other politically subordinate ones (xvii).” Bassnett agrees with Patrice Pavis on the idea of the “crossroads” of cultures, where theatre traditions and practices meet and mingle, and this is a useful image, implying as it does a process of exchange in the encounter between cultural systems. Significantly, she concludes, the image of the “crossroads,” like the image of the labyrinth, implies a plurality of possibilities and rejects any notion of closure (106).

Walter Benjamin in “The Task of The Translator” claims that “in the appreciation of a work of art, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful” (30). Art is not created with an audience in mind, and should not be translated with an audience in mind. On the other hand, for Grotowski theatre is what happens between spectators and actor. In “Translating Cultures: Bridging the Ancient and Modern through Trans-adaptation and Performance,” Hannah Gaff and Ian Borden claim that “the audience response and interaction is equally as important as the artist, demanding that the translation consider the receiver in order to facilitate understanding” (166). As Lawrence Venuti proposes, “the translation should stand at the crux of the two cultures, itself creating a new identity that can be mutually comprehended” (qtd. in Gaff 166).

For translators who believe in readability of a translated text, performability is equal to betrayal because it allows the translator to take greater liberties with the text than many might deem acceptable, in the interests of the end product of “performability.” Bassnett says:

The term performability thus justifies translation strategies, in much the same way as terms such as “adaptation” or “version,” which have never been clearly defined either, are also used to justify or explain certain strategies that may involve degrees of divergence from the source text. (96)

Between the two approaches of performability and readability, I am more inclined to Bassnett's idea of readability, a helpful starting point for the translator to look at the dramatic text as literature. Also, I do believe that physical expressivity is not universal and varies from culture to culture. Gesture and body language are represented differently, understood differently, reproduced differently in different contexts and at different times in accordance with different conventions, different histories and different audience expectations.

Fidelity Makes the Translator Invisible

Most debates on translation (literary and theatrical) have focused on exploring the relationship between what is termed "translation" and what is termed "original." Those debates are, inevitably, also linked to questions of authority and power. One line of thought has "traditionally seen the translation as a traducement, a betrayal, an inferior copy of a prioritized original" (Bassnett 25). Walter Benjamin defines the hallmark of a bad translation as one that intends to perform a transmitting function, transmitting information:

We generally regard as the essential substance of a literary work what it contains in addition to information – as even a poor translator will admit – the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic,' something that a translator can reproduce only if he/she is also a poet. (102)

Another line of thinking focuses instead on the translation itself. Recently, Derrida (and others) reread Walter Benjamin and have defined the translation as the “afterlife” of the source text, its means of survival, its reincarnation. Indeed, “Derrida suggests that effectively the translation becomes the original” (Bassnett 25). One example of this kind of translation is Thomas Mann’s translation of Homer. Bassnett in “When is a Translation Not a Translation” asserts that “when we read Thomas Mann or Homer, if we have no German or Ancient Greek, what we are reading is the original through translation, i.e. that translation is our original” (25).

By saying that fidelity is not servitude but collaboration, Zatlín asks how can one simultaneously be true to the author and yet reach the target audience? (5). She believes that “in theatrical translation, some betrayal is a necessity” (1). For readers of books, recreation of antiquated languages is delightful. They want to know more about another culture and have no problem with reading footnotes and doing research. According to Zatlín, actors must be able to speak naturally because spectator in theatre must grasp immediately the sense of the dialogue. She believes to achieve speakable dialogue, theatrical translators can adapt. Szilvia Naray-Davey in “Naturalistic drama translation through the actors’ naturalistic tools” asserts:

“the fidelity to the author’s voice needs to be a different kind of fidelity: a fidelity to the dramatic tensions between the characters as it is the life within

the characters' interactions that creates the drama, and therefore the primary fidelity has to be to the "life in the text." (259)

In "When Is a Translation Not A Translation," Bassnett asks us to free ourselves from the constraints of the binary oppositions within the translation model because "even where the model of dominant original and subservient translation has been challenged, the idea of some kind of hegemonic original still remains—either in the source or target language" (38). According to Bassnett, we should think of translation as a set of "textual practices" with which the reader "collude" with the writer (27).

Translation and Colonization

In *Postcolonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, Bassnett points out: "It is now recognized that colonialism and translation went hand in hand" (4). She starts her argument with a story of members of the Tupinambà tribe, in today's Brazil, eating a Catholic priest in the sixteenth century. She asserts:

The word "cannibal," originally referring to a group of Caribs in the Antilles, was associated with the Americas. It entered the English language in 1796 meaning "an eater of human flesh." The name of a tribe and the name given to savage peoples who ate human flesh fused into a single term. (2)

When we say something is lost in translation, it means that the translation is valued less than original, because colonies were considered inferior to Europe and a copy of that. The colonies were always a “translation of the Europe” (Bassnett 4). She points out:

We should remember that the colonies’ texts were translated mostly by Europeans for European consumption. Translation was a means both of containing the artistic achievements of writers in other languages and of asserting the supremacy of the dominant, European culture. (6)

Europeans considered themselves from a superior cultural system. For them the target language is not competent enough unless it is translated into a European language. For example, Edward Fitzgerald, translator of *The Ruba’iyat* of Omar Khayyam, suggests that Persian poetry became art only when translated into English. For him, Persian arts are incompetent (Bassnett 6). His translation is considered successful for Europeans but a failure for the Persians. The reason is considering European language and culture superior to the Persian/ Eastern ones. Here I compare some parts of the Persian poem with Fitzgerald’s translation.

این چرخ فلک که □ در او حیرانیم
فانوس خیال ازو □ نالی دانیم
خورشید چراغ دان و عالم فانوس
□ چون صوریم کاندرو گردانیم

Fitzgerald:

For in an and out, above, about, below,
'Tis nothing but a Magie Shadow-show
Play'd in a Box whose Candle is the Sun,
Round which we Phantom Figure come and go. (69)

The closest meaning of the original text could be:

This merry-go-round, this Wheel of Heaven, which amuses us
resembles the Fantasy Lantern [shadow show]—
Sun is the Flame holder, universe is the curtain
And we are images rotating around it

Or

اسرار ازل را نه تو دانی و نه □ ن
زین حرف □ عما (خط □ قر □ ط (نه تو خوانی و نه □ ن
هست از پس پرده گفتگوی □ ن و تو
چون پرده برافتند نه تو □ انی و نه □ ن

Fitzgerald:

There was a Door to which I found no Key.
There was a Veil past which I could not see.

Some little Talk awhile of ME and THEE
There Seemed then no more of THEE and ME.
(102)

Which could be translated:

The secret of eternity is neither known to you nor me
This mystery is neither solved by you nor me
Behind the curtain; lots of chat around you and me
When the curtain falls, there remains neither you nor me

As we see the translation is different from the original text, maybe because Fitzgerald is more loyal the English structure than the content of the Persian poem. And what happens if we translate Fitzgerald' text into another language? Will it be acceptable to the target readers? Bassnett in her introduction of Post-colonial Translation: Theory and practice points out:

if the Persian poets such as Khayyam and Attar needed to be supplied with “a little Art” by Fitzgerald before they could become acceptable in English, Fitzgerald in turn needed to be fairly comprehensively modified and even subverted before he could be metamorphosed into successful Hindi poetry.
(8)

In “When is a Translation Not a Translation?” Bassnett compares translators to the travelers, saying:

Postcolonial scholarship has drawn attention to the implicit imperialist discourse in a great deal of travel literature, for travel writers create their portraits of other cultures explicitly for home consumption, thereby setting them up as the Other. One particularly fascinating aspect of the complexities of decoding travel writing is the role occupied by translation. Since the texts are written for a readership that may be assumed not to have the same access to the culture being described, linguistic difference is signaled in the text. (33)

In the translation of Attar’s *Conference of the Birds* by Dick Davis, the word “whale” is translated into “shark.” I asked myself: Why do we need to change whale into shark in translation of Persian Sufi poetry?⁷ Can we follow the same approach in translating an English text into Persian? Is it because Persian poetry and culture is inferior to the European ones?

⁷ In Persian literature whale stands for danger

Tymoczko defines translation as the activity of “carrying across.” She believes that translation and post-colonial writing are somehow the same. In “Post-colonial writing and literary translation” she asserts:

In this sense (carrying across), post-colonial writing might be imaged as a form of translation (attended with much ceremony and pomp, to be sure) in which venerable and holy (historical, mythic and literary) relics are moved from one sanctified spot of worship to another more central and more secure (because more powerful) location, at which the cult is intended to be preserved, to take root and find new life. (19-20)

Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, challenges the Western ideology that the East is “Other” and inferior to the West. In “The Politics of Translation” Spivak talks about the dangers of “translationese,” which eliminates the identity of less powerful individuals and cultures. Therefore, feminist translators from hegemonic countries would show stronger solidarity with women in postcolonial context by learning the language in which those women speak and write (134). According to Spivak the “politics of translation” currently gives prominence to English and the other “hegemonic” languages of the ex-colonizers. Tymoczko asserts:

The use of rare or untranslated words in translations and the inclusion of unfamiliar cultural material are not necessarily defects of translated texts: translation is one of the activities of a culture in which cultural expansion

occurs and in which linguistic options are expanded through the importation of loan transfers, calques, and the like. The result is, however, that translations very often have a different lexical texture from unmarked prose in the receptor culture. (25)

For this reason, when I worked with *Tomb Dwellers* I looked for opportunities to preserve the “foreignness” of the text without sacrificing meaning, as I show in the next section.

Translation in Practice: Selectivity and Simplifying

Selectivity is essential to the construction of any piece of literature, particularly when the intended audience includes readers who are unfamiliar with the cultural subject. Before I start translating a text, I ask myself to what extent should I concentrate on an easier rendition of the original for the sake of its accessibility for the reader, which would require ironing out what is unfamiliar and would thereby sacrifice its flavor; and to what extent do I transmit the qualities of the work that are foreign to the target, perhaps making the translated work a tougher read than it is in the source? I believe that in translating foreign texts into English, a translator should keep the foreignness. Therefore, when I translated *Tomb Dwellers* I, to the extent possible, avoided Americanizing the names, customs, idioms, and specific expressions, giving priority to the source culture as much as possible.

For example, in the second scene of *Tomb Dwellers*, characters gather around *sofreh*, a table cloth with the image of luxury food, to talk about what each one of them wants to do with the money they would get from digging graves. In Iran a traditional or poor family typically gathers around such a cloth and eats on the floor. I keep the word *sofreh* to transpose the Iranian culture into American culture. There is no equivalence of that in English. This applies to other words such as *tasbih*, *Tapo* and *chador*.

However, I also agree that in the case of theatre the pressure naturally increases to make the language natural to speak and easy to understand in the target (U.S., English-speaking) culture as well. So, after I translated a page I read it out loud to make sure it sounds natural and easy to enunciate. Moreover, in my translation sometimes I had to keep the things foreign, sometimes I found substitutions to make the text natural or as Paul Ricoeur says: “to make our language put on the stranger’s clothes at the same time as we invite the stranger to step into the fabric of our own speech” (xvi). For instance, in Iran, there is an expression here “sweet paste is better than nothing!” which does not communicate in English, so in the play I changed it to the American expression “half a loaf which is better than none.” Or the word *Bilakh* (بیلاخ) in Iran is shown in a gesture equivalent to Americans’ “thumbs up,” but is totally offensive in Iranian culture, meaning “giving someone the finger” and I used the latter in the text and suggest that the actors show it with gesture on stage.

Following Zatin and Bassnet's advice, another method I employed was to work with the cast and the director, using participant observation both to see the actors enunciating the dialogues and observe audience response. In my conversation with professor Guillermo Reyes at Arizona State University on Jan 19th, 2016, he asserted that "working with the cast is an important way of getting a sense of how the translation works and how it communicates its principles to an audience." To Reyes "actors are the first 'line of defense.' They usually ask questions and they are the first to bring up issues of clarity. In order to make choices, they usually want meanings clarified earlier on. Therefore, they are often the best help for the translators." I read the play with the MFA Acting and Directing students at Arizona State University. In this case I chose scene seven because it is the most important part where they are planning for the war.⁸

I also asked my students in Middle Eastern drama class to read the play and we discussed the translation and understandability of the play. For them the synopsis and the context and characters description helped them a lot because too many characters with Persian names that confused them. Also, as a project for my

⁸ I decided someday to stage the play in Arizona on the border of the US and Mexico especially after Trump promised to build a wall between two countries.

translation workshop, I presented scene seven and received valuable comments that I could use for the analysis too.

In working with the cast, dramaturgy has an important role. I needed to explain Arabic and Persian words, context and expressions. For example, saying Arabic prayers depends on the actors. If they are Arabic speakers, they can read it in Arabic. If Americans, they can read the translation of the Arabic lines in English or something close to that from the bible. I keep the word *Bilakh* that means giving the finger and is offensive in Iran. Actors said they can show it on stage but I needed to explain it in the footnote. About the *sofreh* they asked for the definition of *sofreh* in Iran and explanation of the scene and images.

Moreover, they asked about some superstitions in Iran such as crying that means something bad will happen. Or they asked why the contractor pays them with potatoes which is a metaphor of what Ahmadinejad did in his campaign for 2009 election.

There was a debate over scene in which the characters refer to “sending a rat into the midst” of the enemy. They wanted me to explain about the rat. “What are you trying to say by rat?” They suggested that the actors should show sending the RAT by hand gesture. They explained what sending the rat means for Americans. It can be “sparking the fire, adding fuel to a fire, lighting a match or sending the wolf (spy) among the sheep.” One of the actors suggested that I can repeat “send the rat” twice:

send the rat into their midst, send the rat, send it. The group agreed upon “send the rat into their midst! Send in the rat! Send it” with footnotes. There for, I use that in the text.

Because the cast were young they changed some expressions, for example, “cruising for a bruising” was old for them and instead of that I should use “you’re itching for a fight” to suggests “you’re asking for it,” since the literal Iranian expression is “your body is itching.”

They said that adverb or modifiers at the end confused them. With changing the adverb’s place, the subject changes. For example, the modifier at the end of Ayat’s dialogue at the end of the dialogue: “Even if the war happens nobody will die unluckily!” sounds strange. They asked me not to use the word unfortunately because it is formal. Untimely in Bibi’s dialogue: *Inshallah*, may there be no war and may people live in peace! sounded weird so they suggested “Now isn’t the time for that prayer.” When Ayat is explaining about starting the war, at first, I chose “I have already found it just out of curiosity.” But I found out that new generation prefer: “I just so happened to know exactly where it is,” “I found it, strangely enough!” “Just so happened” or “it happened just so.” I decided to choose “I just so happened to know exactly where it is,” because it matches Ayat’s personality as a young man.

In conclusion, they said that the play reminded them of Mother Courage: war, humor and tragedy. They said it was easy for them to get the jokes and that the actors' gestures are important in understanding some dialogues.

A Note About Footnotes and Manipulation

As I mentioned before, I have tried in my translation to keep something of the foreignness of the original text. In the translation that follows, I add footnotes to explain original words and rituals that shows Iranian culture to American readers.

Examples include the word *sofreh* as I explained above, or Arabic expressions like *la elaha elallah* means there "is no god but Allah/God." It is used when someone wants to start doing something. Or "Nobody can be Hava for Adam." Adam in Persian both means Adam, the character from the Adam and Eve story, and the human being. Here, the playwright is playing with the words Hava (Eve and air) and Adam (Adam and the human being). Tymoczko points out:

In the form of introductions, footnotes, critical essays, glossaries, maps, and the like, the translator can embed the translated text in a shell that explains necessary cultural and literary background for the receiving audience and that acts as a running commentary on the translated work. Thus, the translator can

manipulate more than one textual level simultaneously, in order to encode and explain the source text. (22)

My hope is that the prior chapter and this one, the footnotes to the translation, and the analysis that follows it, provide that kind of critical “shell” Tymoczko describes. Working with the cast, reading my translation in the workshops and conferences and receiving feedback was an enjoyable experience for me. It not only helped me to improve my translation but also gave me ideas in analyzing the play. My translation project, *Tomb Dwellers*, is not completed as the languages and cultures evolve and are in transformation. I would like to conclude this chapter with a quote by Benjamin. Benjamin, in “On Language as Such,” shifts traditional translation theory “toward a transcoding model, in which everything is translatable and in a perpetual state of in-translation,” as Emily Apter summarizes in *Translation Zone* (7). Benjamin writes:

“Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language (with the exception of the word of God) can be considered a translation of all the others...Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity.”

(qtd. in Apter 7)

CHAPTER 4: *TOMB DWELLERS*

By Hussein Kiyani

CHARACTERS:

ME'MAR: Local Builder

VALISHAH: Me'mar's brother

MOSLEM: Me'mar's son

SAFDAR: Me'mar's son

BIBI: Me'mar's mother

SAMARGHAND: Valishah's wife

AYAT: Valishah's son

TOUTI: Bibi's adopted daughter

LATIF: The loan shark

PROLOGUE

It is morning. All the characters are sitting under a shelter. AYAT is reading a prayer from a book and others repeat after him.

AYAT

ويا
وجيها عندالله اشفعلنا عندالله

⁹ Oh, you intimate of Allah, stand by us in the Day of Judgment!(Doa Tawassul)

ين
يجيب □ ضطره اذا دعاه ويكشف السؤ¹⁰

ALL

الهم¹¹
صل على □ حمد و ال □ حمد

They all collect themselves, wiping their tears. Touti exits and comes back with a tray. She offers everybody tea. They take their cups and thank her. ME'MAR drinks his tea and picks up his notebooks and keys and gets up. SAMARGHAND grabs the prayer book, *Mafatih*¹², from AYAT and holds it for Me'mar to pass under it.

ME'MAR

*Yaa Ali*¹³, Bibi! Goodbye.

BIBI

Goodbye. God be with you. Come back with good news. *Inshallah*¹⁴.

Following ME'MAR, VALISHAH, SAFDAR and MOSLEM get up.

VALISHAH

Goodbye everybody.

BIBI

¹⁰ (Who listens to the (soul) distressed when it calls on Him, and Who relieves its suffering, and makes you (mankind) inheritors of the earth?)...May your mercy be upon us, oh the most merciful (Quran, Surah Ant, 62).

¹¹ Allah bless Muhammad and his progeny and grant them peace.

¹² A prayer's book for Shias

¹³ Shias call their first Imam, Ali, when they want to do something that needs strength and power.

¹⁴ God willing

Goodbye. God be with you. Come back with good news. *Inshallah*.

MOSLEM

Goodbye everybody.

BIBI

Goodbye. God be with you. Come back with good news. *Inshallah*.

ALL

Inshallah! Inshallah!

ME'MAR, VALISHAH, SAFDAR and MOSLEM exit. TOUTI takes the cups to the kitchen and comes back. She takes BIBI to bed. SAMARGHAND is standing by the gate and watches men leave. She cheers up. We can hear ME'MAR starting the van and driving away. SAFDAR is singing and VALISHAH, MOSLEM, and SAMARGHAND are clapping happily. AYAT exits. He seems pissed off.

AYAT (complaining:)

At least let all these prayers and praises move a little above the earth before you begin your vulgar rejoicing. This is why God locks his blessing away from you, making bread winning such a hardship.

SAMARGHAND

(stops clapping as the van moves farther away and the sounds become less audible.)

Take it easy, son! Clapping isn't a sin. On the contrary, it brings them good luck.

AYAT rushes in.

SAMARGHAND

What's wrong?

AYAT

Then, why don't you have a celebration instead of praying?

SAMARGHAND

We will when they come back with good news. *Inshallah*.

AYAT

Mother, I'm saying the way you are doing things just causes yourself harm and makes all your efforts in vain. I'm just working *ghorbatan indallah*¹⁵.

AYAT takes his shovel and pick and exits.

SAMARGHAND

You have your own thoughts! I have counted everything. Listen! How about taking a break today? Let's wait for them to return and see what we're supposed to do.

AYAT'S VOICE

What we are supposed to do is finish the work. That's all!

SAMARGHAND goes to bed and sleeps. Light fades.

SCENE ONE

BIBI KHAGHAN, an old absent-minded lady, wearing a pair of glasses with no temples which are tied around her head with rubber band, is matching nuts and bolts and putting them in a separate sack. Samarghand is sleeping, having covered herself with a blanket, at times moves around.

¹⁵ To get closer to God.

BIBI (anxiously)

Touti! Touti! Where are we?

TOUTI enters with a *sofreh*¹⁶ and sits next to BIBI.

TOUTI

We've been living in this desert for almost a year: you and me, this Samarghand and her husband and son, and Me'mar Hani and his two sons.

BIBI

What are we doing here?

TOUTI

We're working, Bibi. Me'mar Hani's got a contract for some work.

BIBI

Who is Me'mar Hani?

TOUTI

Me'mar Hani is your oldest son from your first husband, late Mash Jabrail, God bless him.

BIBI calms down.

¹⁶ A piece of cloth that Iranian traditional families use to put their food and plates on it. It functions as a table linen. This particular *sofreh* has images of food on it.

BIBI

What was the contract for?

TOUTI

Fifteen to twenty thousand graves.

BIBI (surprises)

Fifteen to twenty thousand eternal homes? Has there been a flood, a famine, or an earthquake? Why do we need that many graves?

TOUTI

No, Bibi. Thank God. None of these disasters has fallen yet.

BIBI

Then what? Has he been that miserable that he is digging so many graves?

TOUTI

No, Bibi. If you are patient and don't make a scandal, I will tell you. Isn't that what I do every day?

TOUTI gets up and starts putting food on *Sofreh*. She goes to the kitchen several times and comes back, ignoring BIBI.

BIBI

If somebody wants to talk to someone, she comes and sits next to her, looks into her eyes, holds her hands, and gives her heart to her. She doesn't run around like a collared dove whose chick the crows have taken, doing a million other things.

TOUTI

What else can I do, Bibi? Shouldn't I cook for your children? They'll be here any minute.

BIBI

To hell with my children when I want you to sit next to me.

SAMARGHAND

(from under the blanket)

You are making her stop cooking the little thing she cooks every day. Leave her alone! Let her do her work!

TOUTI sits by the water barrel.

BIBI

Who is this lazy bear under the blanket?

TOUTI

You daughter-in-law, Samarghand. Valishah's wife.

BIBI

Has she just delivered a baby?

TOUTI

No.

BIBI

Is she sick?

TOUTI

No.

BIBI

Is she dying?

TOUTI

No.

BIBI

Is she mad at us?

TOUTI

No.

BIBI

Is she crippled? Does she have a fever?

TOUTI

No.

BIBI

Why is she sleeping, then? It's time for the noon prayer.

TOUTI

(being playful says softly)

How am I supposed to know, Bibi? Ask her yourself?

BIBI goes toward Samarghand.

BIBI

(to SAMARGHAND:)

Did you just have a baby? Is noon prayer time a good time to have a baby? If you just gave birth, then where's the baby? How could you find a midwife in this desert?

SAMARGHAND

(to TOUTI:)

Are you happy now that again you brought her to hover over me and disturb my sleep?

BIBI

Oh, no! It seems that it's a human being not a bear!

TOUTI

Mrs. Samarghand, now go back to sleep if you can.

SAMARGHAND

I will! If it's just to show you, I will sleep. I will very well sleep.

She goes back to sleep.

TOUTI

Who cares. Sleep till you get rotten.

SAMARGHAND

Don't worry! I'll move around.

BIBI

(trying to sit down)

How did this sleepy head become my daughter-in-law? How could I let that happen?

TOUTI

Go and sit down! I'll come and explain everything to you.

BIBI

Who cares about this sleeping broth? Tell me about Me'mar Hani. Where is he now and what does he do?

TOUTI

All right. Only if you don't interrupt me with your questions.

(she dries her hands and sits next to BIBI KHAGHAN.)

TOUTI

Me'mar Hani is the apple of your eyes from your first husband, late Mash Jabrail. Me'mar is a mason and a man of God. He has put brick on top of brick and made a lot of houses all around the country. Bibi, Me'mar Hani is very smart. He can design houses that no architect can beat. But the more he has worked, the more trouble and debt he has found himself in. That's why after working for thirty five years

he has no money, nor does he have even a small house. Instead he has given a lot of checks and promissory notes to all kinds of people. That's why he has come on this contract to dig thousands of graves in this desert.

BIBI

For whom?

TOUTI

For the enemy's soldiers in case, God forbid, they attack the country and get killed, *inshallah*, their bodies won't remain on the ground, get rotten; and their graves will be known.

BIBI (surprised)

So that's what we were praying for this morning? For killing the enemy?

TOUTI

That prayer was for getting money from the contractor. He hasn't paid us anything yet.

BIBI

Strange!

SAMARGHAND

He deserves it. He deserves it.

SAMARGHAND picks up the *aftabeh*¹⁷ and goes to the bathroom.

BIBI

What's her problem with Me'mar Hani?

SAMARGHAND

For thirty-five years, Me'mar Hani has dragged that miserable Valishah like an orphan child from one city to another and has made him work like a workhorse and has never paid him a penny.

Touti brings tea for Bibi.

Not even once has Me'mar Hani acted like a brother to give Valishah the chance to pick up the trowel or put bricks on top of bricks to let him learn some masonry, so he could get out of working in the mud, and all the hard labor, and to make a bit of money. He has stuck himself to Valishah like a thorn and doesn't let him go and be able to provide for himself. Once you get stuck in your brother's mud, you have no way out. You have to wait there until the doomsday.

(She exits the bathroom and goes toward the water barrel.)

SAMARGHAND

Aren't you tired of telling her story of Me'mar Hani and Mash Jabrail every day and leaving Valishah out?

TOUTI

I do that because her doctor asked us to remind her everything so that her memory gets better. Why do you do that?

¹⁷ A bucket for washing your private parts after urination and defecation.

SAMARGHAND

(matching nuts and bolts together)

Nothing. We're both beating a dead horse. Her memory will go away and never come back. My cries will go nowhere but return to me. The miserable Me'mar Hani and the stubborn Valishah will be like this forever, a slap on the face. That's all. I smell something burning.

TOUTI

It's burning. Bibi.

TOUTI starts to get up. BIBI grabs her skirt.

BIBI

For God's sake, Touti! Don't go!

TOUTI

I'm not going anywhere.

BIBI

Yes. You'll go. Tomorrow, if not today.

TOUTI

I won't leave you until your death, God forbid.

BIBI

You swear? Will you give me your word?

TOUTI

How many times do I need to swear? Let go of me, Bibi. My food is burning.

BIBI

To hell with food. Is it more important than me?

SAMARGHAND

Leave her, woman! Leave her, woman! Of course, food is more important. You are sticking to her as if you have caught the thief of your properties!

BIBI grabs SAMARGHAND as if she has captured the thief of her belongings.

BIBI

(to SAMARGHAND:)

I swear to God you'll be the one who separates her from me.

SAMARGHAND

What do we have to do with you and this girl? You be hers and she be yours. Let her go and do her work.

(Greedily)

The food is burning.

BIBI

I don't care. Let it burn and you starve to death, so that we can have peace.

TOUTI

Bibi, I don't care if she's hungry. It's a waste of God's blessing.

BIBI

(looks at SAMARGHAND)

OK! Only for God's sake, I'll let you go.

TOUTI rushes toward the kitchen and SAMARGHAND starts unscrewing nuts and bolts she has just matched.

SAMARGHAND

God, save me from everybody! From Bibi, from Touti, from Valishah and from yourself and myself.

SAMARGHAND gets up and sits next to the bed. She starts making clay beads.

TOUTI

Thank God, it wasn't that bad. Bibi, enough with working. Let's go wash your hands and face. It's almost noon.

AYAT enters holding a pick. His clothes are dusty.

AYAT

It's prayer time. They called it already. *Salam alaykom*¹⁸, mother.

SAMARGHAND

Alaykom salam. How many¹⁹?

AYAT

One and a half.

TOUTI

Oh, my Goodness! I was so busy that I forgot to turn the radio on to let everyone know of the *azaan*²⁰.

AYAT rolls up his sleeves and takes off his shoes.

AYAT

That's fine Ms. Touti. When in this whole year haven't you forgotten to listen to the radio and inform others of the *azaan*?

BIBI

Who are you anyway?

¹⁸ Hello

¹⁹ Referring to the graves

²⁰ Call for prayer.

AYAT

This's Ayat, Bibi Khaghan. Ayat.

BIBI

Ayat who? Seyed Abbas's Ayat?

AYAT

No. Valishah's Ayat.

SAMARGHAND

You're Samarghand's Ayat. Reminding you of this for a thousand times.

BIBI

Is this girl your *Moazen*²¹?

AYAT

No Bibi. What are you saying?

AYAT approaches the water barrel.

BIBI

Hey, where are you going? It's our turn.

²¹ A person who calls for prayer.

AYAT

Sure! Please, go ahead! Please!

AYAT sits down. TOUTI takes BIBI to the water barrel and washes her face and hands. She gives her a mirror and combs her hair. SAMARGHAND brings her head out of the blanket and looks at them.

SAMARGHAND

You're not doing a bride make over. That's enough! My son needs to make his ablutions.

AYAT

I will mom. Don't show temper mom. I'm not in a hurry. See how sweet they are!

SAMARGHAND

(with a lump in her throat)

But they're sitting like one is the bride and the other one the beautician.

TOUTI ignores SAMARGHAND and gives BIBI a towel. AYAT approaches them slowly and apologizes.

TOUTI

Excuse me Mr. Ayat. Are you fasting today?

AYAT doesn't want to say anything in front of her mother and appear pretentious and dishonest.

SAMARGHAND

La ilaha Ella allah²²!

TOUTI

I'm asking to see if I need to add more water to the food.

AYAT walks toward to the water barrel.

SAMARGHAND

You add your water! I will eat it! What do you want from my son.
Why is everybody asking him this question? (To AYAT) I hope
you're not fasting, son.

AYAT

I am, if God accepts it.

SAMARGHAND

²² There is no god but Allah (Allah is an Arabic word for God).

OK! Fast then, until you become like a kite and the wind takes you away.

AYAT (to TOUTI)

But if it is too much trouble please add a bowl of water I'll eat that for my *iftar*²³.

SAMARGHAND

No, son! She'll cook something else for your *iftar*.

BIBI

She will not! She's not your or your son's servant.

SAMARGHAND

Are you saying that she's only your and your son's servant?

BIBI lashes out at SAMARGHAND.

BIBI

What did you just say, lazy bear?

SAMARGHAND

What's your problem, old woman?

²³ Breaking one's fast

AYAT

Mother, that's enough!

SAMARGHAND

No! the thing is that she acts as if nobody knows how much work she and her sons are making this poor girl do for them and how much trouble they drag her in. She has been working like a newly-bought ass since morning.

TOUTI becomes upset and leaves. AYAT chases her for a while and stops.

AYAT

(to TOUTI:)

I apologize for what my mother just said and I appreciate what you do for this family.

BIBI

Thank you, son!

SAMARGHAND

Shut up! What are you saying?

AYAT

I'm thanking Ms. Touti like a human being. What's wrong with that?

TOUTI

(comes back from the kitchen)

Mr. Ayat, I don't expect anything from you and your family.

She goes back to the kitchen.

SAMARGHAND

See!

AYAT

That's why they think it's your duty to wash and cook and scrub and do everything for them.

TOUTI

It's OK. I'm living in this house too. It's not fair that everybody works in this family and

(points to SAMARGHAND)

I just relax and fan myself.

SAMARGHAND

What a sharp-tongued woman!

(To AYAT:)

Did you bring some clay for my beads?

AYAT

No, mother. I forgot.

SAMARGHAND

If Touti had asked you, you would have brought six carts of clay.

She exits. AYAT is making his ablutions. TOUTI enters with some potatoes. AYAT lets her wash the potatoes.

AYAT

You're working more than others. I wonder why they don't appreciate it. You know what hurts me? That we're not supposed to fight with our parents and our family. I think this is your fault too. You shouldn't let them treat you like that.

TOUTI leaves, ignoring AYAT. BIBI walks toward AYAT.

BIBI

Let's see if you can make her run away from us. Finish your ablution and say your prayers. What do you want from her?

AYAT

(shows his hands)

I will, Bibi. After my hands get dry.

BIBI

Go! They'll get dry on the way. Don't be such a Muslim.

AYAT enters the tent and starts praying. BIBI KHAGHAN stares at the bird net on top of the water barrel and sits.

AYAT

*Allahu Akbar*²⁴ ...

(He starts praying.)

BIBI

I wish I had a cage and locked you inside. You'll betray me one day.
I swear the moment I finish these nuts and bolts you're gone.

TOUTI leaves the kitchen carrying a piece of food. BIBI starts matching nuts and bolts.

TOUTI

Bibi, I just washed your hands. Come on! Eat this food. They're late this time. They usually come back before noon every time they go to talk to the contractor.

SAMARGHAND enters with some clay.

SAMARGHAND

Does it hurt you to bring me some food?

TOUTI

I thought it's bad if a mother eats in front of her fasting son.

²⁴ God is great.

SAMARGHAND

How shameless! Like she's a clergy!

We hear the sound of van and SAFDAR is singing. Others clapping.
SAMARGHAND exits. The van brakes. Silence.

MOSLEM'S VOICE

What happened, Me'mar? Again, you braked before you clutched?

ME'MAR'S VOICE

No! It stopped suddenly. Dammit!

SAFDAR'S VOICE

Get off! Let's push it!

ME'MAR'S VOICE

Let's park it here and walk. It's close.

MOSLEM'S VOICE

Here? In this slope? With that brake and gear?

ME'MAR'S VOICE

God is great.

(He pulls the hand brake.)

SAMARGHAND'S VOICE

What happened, Valishah? Did you get the money? How much? Why aren't you getting off?

VALISHAH'S VOICE

Are you blind? Both my door and Me'mar's are stuck.

MOSLEM'S VOICE

Both doors?

SAMARGHAND'S VOICE

Hurry up! Come on open their doors!

They open the doors.

ME'MAR'S VOICE

You broke my door.

VALISHAH'S VOICE

It's so hot.

SAMARGHAND screams.

VALISHAH'S VOICE

The van's running away. Watch out, brother!

TOUTI is watching them from behind the fences. AYAT is praying.

AYAT

*Allahu Akbar?*²⁵

(With the gesture of his hand he asks what is going on.)

TOUTI

The van moved.

AYAT

Allahu Akbar...

(He shows pulling the hand brake with the gesture of his hands.)

TOUTI

Maybe it's not working.

BIBI

(to TOUTI:)

Do they only have this son?

TOUTI

Yes. They couldn't make any after him.

BIBI watches AYAT with enthusiasm.

²⁵ Ayat is going through all the motions of the ritual prayer and saying what he needs to say out loud but he is also interacting with those around him (which completely negates the prayer).

BIBI

Just look at him! He's a handsome and religious guy. He prays and fasts.

(Softly)

And I think he likes you.

TOUTI

Don't tease me, Bibi! What does he have to do with me? What do I have to do with him? What do we have to do with each other?

BIBI

He should wish it. Who better than you? You're beautiful, smart, and a good housekeeper. What else does he want?

TOUTI

I want to go and check on them.

BIBI

Don't change the subject, Touti. Do you like him?

TOUTI

I am going to go help them.

She is leaving.

BIBI

Wait! Answer me!

TOUTI

What should I say?

BIBI

What do you mean? Do you like him or not?

She exits. BIBI, gets up and goes stands next to AYAT who is praying.

BIBI (threatening)

I'll curse you a thousand times every day, if you marry her before I die. Beware of an old woman's curse! Don't try to make her fall in love with you as long as I am alive. I'll haunt you both in this world and in the other one.

AYAT

Allahu akbar!

BIBI

What does Allahu Akbar mean? Do you mean Okay, Bibi or not?

AYAT

Allahu Akbar!

BIBI

*Marhaba*²⁶! May Allah split you in half, if you break your promise!

Light fades.

SCENE TWO

All characters are sitting around a rectangular *sofreh* which has images of expensive luxury food. TOUTI collects the dirty dishes and walks toward the water barrel. AYAT wants to help her but TOUTI refuses. VALISHAH shakes his legs on *sofreh*.

SAMARGHAND

I asked you a thousand times not to shake your fucking legs on *sofreh*.

VALISHAH

Thank God! This was the best dinner I have ever had.

SAMARGHAND

Are you talking about that “half a loaf which is better than none²⁷?”

²⁶ Bravo! Good job!

²⁷ Persian expression is “sweet paste is better than nothing!”

VALISHAH

Half a loaf plus this fancy food is the best food ever.

(He points to the images.)

Right, Me'mar? Right, Moslem? Right, Safdar? Right, Bibi?

SAMARGHAND

Don't even think of luxury food because I'm going to save this money for Ayat's wedding. We can spend some for going to Haj, Karbala or Syria, God willing. We'll put the rest in the bank and just use the interest till the end of our life.

SAFDAR

Enjoy it if you think we're getting that much money!

SAMARGHAND

Safdar, everybody's share is mentioned in the book. I also wrote the numbers of the graves Valishah and Ayat have dug so far in my notebooks.

(She shows her neck wallet).

They won't be ripped off. Touti, why don't you bring the watermelon?

AYAT

(gets up)

I will!

AYAT brings the watermelon and starts cutting it.

VALISHAH

I hope this watermelon turns out as ripe and sweet as our one-year project in this desert was.

AYAT is cutting the watermelon and handing it to others.

SAFDAR

First, we must pay our creditors to get rid of them.

MOSLEM

Get rid of them? We've already gotten rid of them for eleven months and two days.

SAFDAR

They'll find us finally. A debtor is like a murderer. He overthinks about his debt and the creditors until he betrays himself.

MOSLEM

(hits SAFDAR in the head)

Shut the fuck up, brother! What will remain for us if you pay the creditors? We have to buy a van and work. In two months we can pay them back, no matter if you drive it or have it rented.

SAFDAR

What if in the first trip you have a car accident with your beautiful driver's license and kill like ten people? I say, buying a car, any kind of car, is a waste of money. Even if nothing happens to it, the price goes down every day. That's it. We have to pay the creditors and then we'll see what we can do with the rest of our money.

SAMARGHAND

(to AYAT)

Thank God that you and your miserable fucked up father haven't borrowed any money.

MOSLEM and SAFDAR chuckles. AYAT turns his face.

VALISHAH (embarrassed)

What do you want to do with your cut, Me'mar?

ME'MAR

I'd let the elderly talk first.

VALISHAH

Sorry, brother! Please, go ahead!

ME'MAR

Bibi Khaghan, what do you wish to do with this money?

BIBI

What?

VALISHAH

He's asking what you want to do with your cut.

BIBI

What?

Everybody tries to explain to BIBI what they want to do with their shares so that she will understand them.

AYAT

Leave her alone! You're scaring her. Bibi Jaan²⁸ what do you want to do with the money Me'mar got from the contractor?

BIBI

What?

TOUTI explains to her.

BIBI

What money? Mine or yours?

TOUTI

She's asking hers or yours.

ME'MAR

Damn! I totally forgot.

He grabs his jacket and goes toward BIBI and TOUTI.

²⁸ Dear

VALISHAH

You might want to leave your coat here. It seems heavy.

MOSLEM and SAFDAR stretch their hands to grab the coat. ME'MAR sits next to BIBI and gives her a little money.

ME'MAR

Here, Bibi! It's your money for matching bolts and nuts.

BIBI

Give it to Touti!

TOUTI takes the money and counts it. SAFDAR and MOSLEM are playing cards. VALISHAH and SAMARGHAND are talking.

TOUTI

It's more than what we used to get.

ME'MAR

I bargained. Before it was 6.5 *tomans* per each nut and bolt. This time he gave us 7.

BIBI

Was he OK with that or did you force him?

ME'MAR

What force? ME'MAR Hani never forces anybody. He was so satisfied with you that he sent three five-kilo-sacks more. He promised to give you eight this time. they're in the truck.

BIBI

How much is three five-kilo-sacks?

TOUTI

Almost 2.3 stones.

BIBI

2.3 stones? I won't be alive that long.

ME'MAR

God forbid!

VALISHAH

(notices that ME'MAR is upset)

What happened, brother?

ME'MAR

She's saying she won't be alive that long to do three sacks.

VALISHAH

Why not, Bibi? It's the beginning of our pleasure. We're getting rich. You didn't answer my question. What do you want to do with the money?

BIBI

What should I say? I wish I could save some money for this girl.

AYAT

*Afarin!*²⁹ That's it.

MOSLEM

Do you want us to find you a little dowry, and an old religious man and throw you a wedding party?

MOSLEM sits next to VALISHAH. He grabs VALISHAH's hat and *tasbih*³⁰. VALISHAH puts on SAMARGHAND's *chador*. They both get up and dance although VALISHAH seems reluctant in the beginning. VALISHAH imitates a pregnant lady as if he is pregnant and then carrying baby.

SAFDAR

(picks a bucket and plays drum and sings)

What night is tonight? It's the wedding night...

AYAT

(grumpily and softly)

²⁹ *Bravo!*

³⁰ Prayer beads. Rosary.

Shame on you!

MOSLEM

What do you say? Don't you want to get married?

BIBI

What's marriage? Damn it!

MOSLEM and VALISHAH sit down.

SAFDAR

Marriage is what you did five times and enjoyed.

BIBI

Me marrying five times was not because I enjoyed being with different men. I needed to do that because I was poor. Tell them Touti!

TOUTI

(while collecting the dishes)

When Mash Jabrael, her first husband and ME'MAR Hani's father died, he didn't leave them any money. That's why BIBI had to get married to the first person who proposed to her. He was a man of God, named Ali Hasan Hamoomchi. He raised Hani.

ME'MAR

He wasn't a good man of God. God bless him! He was all the time cursing and beating me up for seven years. Once he was trying to choke me in the basement.

VALISHAH

I was so lucky being raised by you after my father died, then.

ME'MAR

Of course!

SAMARGHAND

At least if he had left you something you didn't need to get married again and let Me'mar Hani raise Valishah.

TOUTI

At the time there wasn't enough bread for people. It was famine and drought all the time. Poor peasants couldn't fill their...what was that? *Tapos*³¹?

VALISHAH

Yes, *tapo*.

(He shows a big *tapo* with his hand.)

Yes. There was *tapo* but no flour.

ME'MAR

Or when there was flour, there wasn't any *tapos*.

³¹ Big jug for saving flour.

TOUTI

Exactly! They couldn't fill their *tapos* with flour. For the same reason a woman whose husband was crushed or collapsed or died because of the illness, didn't have any choice rather than getting married to the first suitor— single, married, old, widow didn't make any difference. For example, after that building fell on ME'MAR Hani's father... is that right?

VALISHAH

My brother's father was a local builder in Ahwaz. The building fell on him. My father was crushed under the stable ceiling. We were trying to save the sheep and the cows when my father passed away. It was too late to save him. Let's not open the old graveyard! ME'MAR, what do you want to do with your money?

ME'MAR

After I give you your share...

(he shows a big share with a gesture of his hand and throws it toward VALISHAH and he grabs it.)

and we separate

(VALISHAH returns the imaginary money back to ME'MAR.)

VALISHAH

Don't say that, brother! We've been inseparable for forty years. Don't think that I was your orphan son only when I was a kid. I swear to God I'm still your son. If you leave me, God knows what will happen to me.

SAMARGHAND

How pathetic! You have a wife and –observe and enjoy- a grown up son, *Mashallah*³². Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

VALISHAH

No! ME'MAR and I had an agreement that we wouldn't separate until we die. Even after that we're going to lay in a double-decker grave.

ME'MAR

Yes, our double-decker grave. But she's right too.

SAMARGHAND

What a surprise!

VALISHAH

She's got no right to say that! Only you have the right because you raised me. I owe you for that. Only the angel of death can separate us. No! Even he can't do that.

He put his head on ME'MAR's lap. SAMARGHAND turns her back to them.

SAMARGHAND

I hope you die and AYAT and I carry your body out of this desert!

VALISHAH

³² How awesome! Iranians also say *Mashallah* to protect oneself from the evil eyes and jealousy

I won't even give you my dead body.

ME'MAR, MOSLEM and SAFDAR encourage him to go on.

SAMARGHAND

Even if you give it to me, I throw it in front of the desert dogs and wolves.

VALISHAH

I swear to God even dogs and wolves are better than you.

SAMARGHAND

I hope all I've done for you and all the years I've wasted with you becomes an infected blister and kills you.

VALISHAH

First of all, you sleepy bear haven't done anything for me. Second of all, black dog's barking brings no rain!³³

SAMARGHAND

God! Send a sudden flood and wash him away from the earth!

³³ Cattle don't die from the crow's cursing!

VALISHAH

Come on, ME'MAR! Punch me in the face for not listening to you and marrying this two-headed serpent instead of Looch Ali Ghadam's daughter.

SAMARGHAND gets up. VALISHAH stands up facing her.

SAMARGHAND

Why ME'MAR? I myself will punch you so that you shit from your mouth instead of eating with it!

VALISHAH

Go ahead! Beat me if you've got any balls!

TOUTI enters with some cups of tea.

SAMARGHAND

Who asked for tea?

ME'MAR

Me! Fatherless me!

SAMARGHAND goes toward barrel and washes her face and hands. TOUTI offers everyone tea.

VALISHAH (frustrated)

You didn't let ME'MAR say what he wants to do with his money!

ME'MAR

I want to do two things. First, I want to buy dowries for my daughters!

SAFDAR and MOSLEM

Ya Abulfazl³⁴!

They sit on their knees and listen carefully to what they had already ignored.

ME'MAR

Maryam, Rezvan, Somayeh, Atefeh, Sedighe, and Masoomeh.

VALISHAH

Poor Hagar!

ME'MAR

Oh, yeah. And Hagar!

SAFDAR

You're taking all the money, then.

MOSLEM

³⁴ A holy character in Shia. My goodness!

He's not. His stupid flunky sons-in-law are, only if I let them. After you give their dowries, what will you do with the rest of the money?

ME'MAR

I want to save some money for BIBI's funeral and have a respectful ceremony for her as she wishes.

MOSLEM

(hold ME'MAR's hand and turns to BIBI:)

Bibi, did you ask him such a thing?

BIBI

What? Who you?

MOSLEM

Why are you putting words in her mouth, ME'MAR Hani? If she wanted, she would tell us.

VALISHAH is getting mad that MOSLEM is holding ME'MAR's hand.

VALISHAH

Let go of my brother's hand!

MOSLEM

What's your problem?

VALISHAH

Are you saying that my brother is a liar? That BIBI didn't ask for that?

MOSLEM and VALISHAH start fighting.

ME'MAR

Stop! My hand is not broken.

They stop.

TOUTI

ME'MAR Hani isn't making it up. BIBI wishes that.

VALISHAH

(to MOSLEM)

There you go! Did you hear that?

(to ME'MAR:)

Sorry brother.

(to MOSLEM:)

Son of a bitch!

MOSLEM

Well, she's not dead yet. We'll figure it out after she dies.

SAFDAR

She won't die until she kills three more husbands.

BIBI cries.

TOUTI

Let's go for a walk, Bibi! It's good for you.

(To others:)

Tea is ready. The Samovar³⁵ is still on. Grab more tea if you want.

TOUTI help BIBI to get up. They exit.

MOSLEM

I don't understand why she's standing up for BIBI this much. She isn't even family.

SAMARGHAND

Lucky her!

ME'MAR

She may be a stranger to us but to BIBI she's like a daughter.

(VALISHAH and SAMARGHAND are talking.)

BIBI was like her mother and now she's returning her favor.

AYAT

No children do that these days. Excuse me, mother. Excuse me, father. Excuse me, uncle. I'm younger than you and shouldn't say this

³⁵ Traditional tea maker.

but weren't you ashamed of talking about the money and your dreams and not asking her if she needed anything? She has feelings too! It's so brutal that nobody is giving her anything. After all, she has been working here, cleaning up, cooking food for us all these years. That's why God sent you to this desert to dig graves and beg for a penny!

ME'MAR

Don't make me say something that makes both of us say nothing!

Everybody looks at ME'MAR shocked.

SAFDAR

(to AYAT:)

Why didn't you ask her what she needs?

MOSLEM

He couldn't because he's shy.

SAFDAR

If you couldn't do that, your mother and father could. If you've asked me I could do that too. Why are so mad at us? Just go ahead and propose to her and leave us alone!

ME'MAR grabs his bag and goes toward the barrel. He picks up the *aftabeh* and enters the bathroom.

VALISHAH

I'll go talk to her.

SAMARGHAND

Sit down! If you go and say anything to this girl, I'll choke you.

VALISHAH

Why? What's wrong with her? And how do you want to choke me?

SAMARGHAND

I'll put a pillow on your face and sit on it.

SAFDAR

A terrible way to die!

MOSLEM

Why, auntie? You really hate Touti that much?

SAFDAR

Auntie is looking for an excuse to kill uncle and take all his money.

SAMARGHAND

Don't talk nonsense! What money? ME'MAR hasn't told us yet how much he got from the contractor. Valishah, has he told you? Huh? You were with him today. Moslem! Do you know, Moslem?

SAFDAR

Of course we know. It's obvious that he got three payments from the previous contract and one payment from the new one. Right, Me'mar?

ME'MAR laughed. SAMARGHAND and MOSLEM go toward the bathroom.

MOSLEM

Did he pay you more? Maybe, he gave you all the payments in advance.

(He turns to other)

Sometimes they do.

ME'MAR laughs. SAFDAR joins SAMARGHAND and MOSLEM.

VALISHAH

How lovely! I know why you're laughing.

ME'MAR laughs.

SAMARGHAND

Why is he laughing? Did he lose all the money or give it up?

SAFDAR

We were together all the time except in the contractor's office.

MOSLEM

I can't interpret his laughter. He laughs a lot.

VALISHAH

But I can, Moslem. I have lived with his laughters for forty years.

MOSLEM

(to SAFDAR:)

What's he talking about, SAFDAR?

SAFDAR

Nonsense! Laughter is laughter. They all mean the same.

VALISHAH

They're different.

SAFDAR

OK! What is the difference between his laughter this morning and this one?

VALISHAH gets up and joins the others.

VALISHAH

Should I tell them, Me'mar?

(ME'MAR laughs.)

Here you go! He said tell them but slowly. He doesn't want you to be surprised. His laughter this morning meant that he was very happy to go get the money and this laughter means that this contractor didn't pay him a penny like the others and asked for something new. Am I right, ME'MAR?

ME'MAR exits the bathroom.

ME'MAR

The new contractor said he won't pay us until we finish the work entirely.

ME'MAR goes toward the barrel. He throws his bag. MOSLEM and SAFDAR open it and look for the money. AYAT joins them.

Light fades.

SCENE THREE

Near sunrise. Everybody is sleeping in the tent. The tent is open. Dogs are barking in distance. Night birds are singing. SAFDAR gets up slowly and picks up a small bag. He grabs ME'MAR's jacket from under his head and takes the van keys out of it. He leaves the tent slowly. MOSLEM is watching him. He puts on his shoes and get ready to leave. Suddenly, he feels thirsty and goes toward the barrel. When he gets up he sees MOSLEM standing behind him.

MOSLEM

God damn you coward sneak! Safdar!

SAFDAR

I was going to beat up the contractor. If this is coward, what the brave people do, then? Tell me and I'll do that.

MOSLEM

Why are you taking this bag with you, then?

SAFDAR (cries)

I'm taking my stuff in case he gets killed and the police send me to jail.

MOSLEM (cries)

Are you saying that after you kill him you're going to turn yourself in to be executed?

SAFDAR

I'm not that stupid. But you know how unlucky I am. They'll find me immediately.

MOSLEM hits SAFDAR on the head and SAFDAR kicks him.

MOSLEM

Stop this nonsense, Safdar! A person full of rage who wants to murder doesn't think about the consequences.

SAFDAR

To hell with the consequences. I just wanted to leave this desert forever. If you're in, *Bismillah*³⁶. If not, hit the sack!!

MOSLEM

³⁶ Meaning in the name of Allah. It is used when someone wants to start doing something.

Go if you want to. But you can't take ME'MAR's van.

SAFDAR

Why not? Do you think it's your father inheritance? He doesn't even own this broken van.

MOSLEM

I know he doesn't own anything but his birth certificate. Although, I'm not sure about that either. But, that's not a good excuse.

SAFDAR

I'll take this van and leave this graveyard and nobody can stop me.

MOSLEM

I can!

SAFDAR

How?

MOSLEM

(searches for something in his pocket. SAFDAR thinks he's looking for a knife but MOSLEM takes out a joint)

With this!

SAFDAR

You asshole! Have you robbed the factory? I thought we smoked all of them last night. How many are left?

MOSLEM

Enough to keep you here.

SAFDAR

(while sitting down)

You know that there is nothing in this job.

MOSLEM

What job?

(while sitting next to him)

If we listen to the contractors who are being switched and saying different things every day, we won't get anything. But if we put our brains together, we'll succeed.

SAFDAR

If we had any brains, we would have left a long time ago.

MOSLEM

To where? Nowhere is better than here. Coming here was a smart move. At least, the creditors can't find us and they let us go eventually.

SAFDAR

You wish! How naive!

MOSLEM

The creditor is always hopeful and the debtor is fearful. As long this hope and fear exist, there is a risk. If you're that afraid of the creditors, why did you borrow that much money and give everyone promissory notes?

SAFDAR

I didn't have a divine knowledge! I didn't know I ended up being like ME'MAR. But your situation isn't any better.

MOSLEM

But between you and me, you're a copy of Me'mar.

SAFDAR

You're his certified copy, and you're not aware of that. You know what? Misery and poverty are genetic. Children inherit that from their fathers. Nobody can stop this chain.

MOSLEM

Bullshit! If we were smart enough, we could have saved ourselves.

SAFDAR

As Me'mar always says "what you're saying makes an ass laugh and a camel dance." How?

MOSLEM

Right now we have twenty thousand graves which are ready for accepting bodies.

SAFDAR laughs.

MOSLEM

Why are you laughing?

SAFDAR

Ready for what?

MOSLEM

Accepting the bodies! That means we can find a buyer soon.

SAFDAR

What buyer? Who wants to buy twenty thousand graves from us? Those who requested the graves in the first place all escaped.

MOSLEM

You're right. They escaped and didn't give us any money. So, we own the graves now.

SAFDAR

(hits his forehead with his hand as if he has signed and sealed a document)

OK! They're all yours. Enjoy them!

(He gets up. MOSLEM stops him.)

MOSLEM

SAFDAR, do you know that there is a town in thirty, thirty five kilometers whose graveyard is getting full and they haven't made a new one yet.

SAFDAR

None of my business!

He wants to leave but MOSLEM stops him.

MOSLEM

I've asked around. There are thirty or forty thousand people in this town. Among them are two families, who hate each other and fight all the time.

SAFDAR

What families?

MOSLEM

They used to be together. But now they can't get along simply because both of them want to have the last word.³⁷

SAFDAR

Are you thinking of sparking a fire and making them kill each other to fill the graves?

MOSLEM

Yes! Yes! But I'm afraid.

SAFDAR

You're afraid! Huh! Let's have another joint maybe the fear goes away.

³⁷ Upper hand

MOSLEM wants to light another one.

VALISHAH

(in sleep:)

Don't!

MOSLEM stops. He wants to light it again.

VALISHAH

(in sleep:)

Don't! Don't pull my blanket, brother!

Light fades.

SCENE FOUR

It's morning and the tent is open. BIBI KHAGHAN is still sleeping. AYAT rushes in.

AYAT

*Yallah*³⁸!

³⁸ A warning that says someone is entering.

TOUTI

Come in, Mr. AYAT. Is it noon already?

AYAT

Bibi Khaghan is still asleep. Strange!

TOUTI

She doesn't feel well when she can't remember. Even my stories can't help. Then, she gets nervous and becomes senseless for a couple of hours. "As if the darkness surrounds me" she says.

AYAT

I had no idea she was that sick.

TOUTI

You never asked, Mr. Ayat. How Samarghand is doing? Is she really working or pretending that. Or maybe you've come to bring her some sugar-water.

AYAT

She's fine, thank God. She used to work hard but since the contractors started breaking the deal and didn't give us any money, she became depressed. She sleeps a lot because she doesn't want to overthink.

TOUTI

I wonder how they still trust the contractors and dig graves after what they went through.

AYAT

The human being is the only creature of God who has so much hope and patience. Besides, when someone starts a project he doesn't want to stop it without being paid.

TOUTI

Like you.

AYAT

I'm working *ghorbatan elallah*³⁹.

TOUTI

What does it mean?

AYAT

It means to please God. To get closer to God.

(He gets closer to TOUTI.)

TOUTI

³⁹ To please God or to get closer to God

I know the definition. Someone works *ghorbatan elallah*, who isn't poor. You, by God's grace, are living in extreme poverty.

AYAT

Poverty isn't a flaw. Sin is.

TOUTI

Of course, it's not a flaw. But you have to think about the future. You've been digging graves in this desert for a year and you haven't been paid yet. Maybe you're confident that your mom has your back and will give you money.

AYAT

I swear to God I don't want money.

TOUTI

Why not? Do you think it'll spoil the reward? Like there is any reward in this job.

AYAT

There will be, *Inshallah*.

TOUTI

I don't think so.

AYAT

Why are you saying that, Ms. Touti, after all the conversations and meetings we've had and all the washing, cooking and cleaning you've done?

TOUTI

When did you have any conversations and meetings with me? You did that between yourselves.

(Enters the kitchen.)

I just did washing, cooking and cleaning. Yes. That's what I do here.

TOUTI sits by barrel and AYAT joins her.

AYAT

I'm still mad at them because of what happened yesterday. If they're ignoring you, you shouldn't lose faith in the reward and repayment.

TOUTI

I don't know, Mr. Ayat. You're wiser than the rest of us. But the more I think, the less I find any relationships between digging graves for the enemy who hasn't attacked us and getting a reward from God.

AYAT

If that's the issue, I can explain more. But if you don't believe in reward and repayment, I can't change your mind.

TOUTI

OK! Explain it! Maybe I understand. If not, at least we had a topic to talk about and be entertained.

AYAT

I'm so disappointed with you, Ms. Touti.

TOUTI

What for?

AYAT

For... Forget it! I thought you were different. I counted on you.

TOUTI

Why?

AYAT

Because...*Astaghfirullah*⁴⁰. Cut it out, Ms. Touti! Everybody knows...

TOUTI

What does everybody know?

AYAT

Nothing!

⁴⁰ May Allah forgive me.

He starts to leave.

TOUTI

Tea is ready. Would you like some?

AYAT exits.

AYAT'S VOICE

Thanks. We have tea in the graveyard.

TOUTI enters the kitchen and comes out carrying a tray with a cup of tea.

TOUTI

Mr. Ayat!

AYAT gets back quickly.

TOUTI

You certainly didn't come to get annoyed with me and go back.

AYAT

No! I just came to let you know that my parents are arguing because of you.

TOUTI

Why because of me?

AYAT

Don't be upset if they argue and if, God forbid, they disrespect you.
And accept my apologies in advance.

We can hear SAMARGHAND and VALISHAH arguing.

SAMARGHAND

Valishah, I swear to God if you say a word to this girl, I'll cement your lips together.

VALISHAH

Fine! Even if you cement all my nine holes, I won't let you ruin his life like you did mine.

SAMARGHAND

Ruin his life? She'll ruin it, if they get married.

VALISHAH

What's wrong with her? Give me one reason he shouldn't marry her.

SAMARGHAND

You beast! She doesn't have a family, a dowry or a wealth. What other reasons do you want?

VALISHAH

Her family is Bibi Khaghan and she can buy dowry for her. We'll help her as much as we can. What else do you want?

SAMARGHAND

You, pathetic loser! How can Bibi Khaghan pay for her dowry? From matching nuts and bolts? Or when this cursed Me'mar Hani is going to get money from the contractor so that you can pay for your son's wedding?

VALISHAH

You can blame whoever you want. But never talk behind my brother's back or I'll go crazy on you!

SAMARGHAND

Drop dead! Other men are hen-pecked, you're brother-pecked!

SAMARGHAND and VALISHAH enter. They become shocked when they see AYAT and TOUTI.

VALISHAH

Thank God, you got here before me, son, to talk to Touti.

VALISHAH kisses AYAT and he is going to kiss TOUTI.

SAMARGHAND

Valishah!

(To AYAT:)

If you have talked to this girl and promised her anything, I'll grab a knife and rip my stomach and be done!

SAMARGHAND is going to grab a knife by the barrel.

TOUTI

Keep it down, Samarghand! Bibi is asleep.

SAMARGHAND grabs TOUTI's hand and brings her closer to herself.

SAMARGHAND

What did he tell you? What did you tell him, you menace!

VALISHAH

After we're done with the graves, I'm going to have such a big wedding for my son that no princes have ever had! I have a dream to see your wedding!

SAMARGHAND

(holding the knife behind VALISHAH's back)

Shut up, you miserable wimp! I won't let you do that with the graves' money as long as I'm alive.

VALISHAH

How do you want to do that? With your salary, doctor? I swear to God, Samarghand if you don't knock it off right now, I'll kill you and I'll pay your blood money myself.

SAMARGHAND

Don't bother! I'll kill myself.

SAMARGHAND lays down on the floor pretending she wants to kill herself. TOUTI and AYAT are trying to stop her.

TOUTI

Samarghand! Stop braying in front of the poor old woman. If you want to make a fuss, get out! Scream as much as you want in the desert!

SAMARGHAND

Drop dead! It's all your fault, shrew!

VALISHAH

Get off her! Let her kill herself! Kill!

(to TOUTI:)

I hope you become my daughter-in-law. Don't listen to her. After all, she's a mother-in-law. She has to do that, or people might wonder! ME'MAR and I will go to town tomorrow and will bring a kind and handsome *mullah*⁴¹ to marry you two.

(To AYAT:)

What do you say?

(To TOUTI:)

Is that fine with you?

⁴¹ Clergy

BIBI KHAGHAN wakes up. She is nervous, breathing fast.

BIBI

Touti! Touti!

SAMARGHAND and TOUTI sit next to BIBI. TOUTI hugs BIBI.

TOUTI

What is it, Bibi?

BIBI

Thank God you're here. I had a dream that some people covering their faces kidnapped you. Thank God you're here.

TOUTI

I'm here.

(She hugs BIBI. Light fades.)

SCENE FIVE

It's daytime. TOUTI is reading prayer from a small book (*Mafatih*). BIBI is repeating after her while she's matching bolts and nuts. TOUTI's voice becomes softer as the stage lights go on. We can hear the van getting closer and then it stops. MOSLEM and SAFDAR get off and close the van's door. Both are exhausted. They enter and go toward the barrel and wash their hands and faces. BIBI and TOUTI look at them and then continue what they were doing. ME'MAR HANI rushes in and looks at MOSLEM and SAFDAR.

ME'MAR (furious)

Why did you leave work without telling us? What are they offering in that wrecked town which makes you two wanderlust freaks go gadding about in there all the time?

MOSLEM

They're offering efficiency and courage. You're welcome to join us if you want. You might like their offers and take some. Maybe your life ends well.

ME'MAR

My life ends well if I do not see yours end wrong.

MOSLEM

Why would you care about our misery? Go and die happy whenever you want.

He throws the key.

ME'MAR

I never saw my father. But I swear to Prophet Muhammad if he was alive I wouldn't talk to him like that.

SAFDAR

(to MOSLEM:)

He's right. Don't talk to him like that! Do you want him to curse us and our life becomes worse than what it is now?

MOSLEM

You shut up! Our life won't get any worse. Because this is the worst situation ever: living at the end of the world for a year. Digging thousands of graves for free and having no money in your pocket. And like wretched dogs looking for buyers. None of those motherfuckers willing to buy the graves and pay. And hearing your coward father nagging you all the time. Could it get any worse?

ME'MAR

It could. When one loses hope in God and instead expects his people to show mercy on him.

MOSLEM

What else should we have done? Have we not prayed and cried enough every Friday night, Thursday morning, Monday evening, Wednesday sunset after your bastard nephew? Have we not prayed to be able to pay back our loans and success in work, all the while ignoring the blisters on our hands? Have we not asked this poor old woman to pray for us day and night and nothing happened?

(He points at TOUTI and BIBI.)

Look! Obviously, they're still praying for our happiness and no God is listening to them....

ME'MAR

I don't have anything to say to you. You're not a Muslim anymore, Moslem. Even looking at your face is a sin!

ME'MAR covers his face with hands.

MOSLEM

Don't take your hands off your face, then! I don't want to ruin heaven for you and I don't want to see you in hell with us. They might send you there, unluckily for us.

MOSLEM enters the kitchen. ME'MAR grabs SAFDAR's hand and drags him toward the barrel.

ME'MAR

Did you have a car accident? Did he hit his head on something?

SAFDAR

He's right, Me'mar. I think the same but he's got the courage to talk about it.

ME'MAR

Talking nonsense doesn't need courage. Everybody can talk like this. God gave us tongues and the ability to talk but one should think about the consequences. You're the one who is afraid of God. Tell me why are you going to town every day while you know there is a lack of gas in the town. What's in it for you? Why don't you talk to me?

SAFDAR

We're looking for buyers for this useless graveyard.

Silence.

ME'MAR

Buyers?

SAFDAR

Yes!

MOSLEM enters with two cups of tea. He gives one to SAFDAR.

MOSLEM

(to ME'MAR:)

If this graveyard has any owners, why is nobody coming to pay us so that we can leave this hell that is surrounded by dogs and wolves? Why are we begging for money?

ME'MAR

I swear to God if you weren't my son, I would report you to be sent to jail and be hung!

MOSLEM

Why? For working in this graveyard for a year and not getting paid?

ME'MAR

No! Because you're becoming a *kafir*⁴² for not being paid. I'll go to town and sell the van and pay you. Maybe you'll leave us alone and believe in God again.

SAFDAR

No idiot will buy a van with no title. Besides, who's going to buy this crap.

ME'MAR

I'll find someone. You don't need to worry about that.

MOSLEM

OK! Do whatever you want. Now, leave us alone.

ME'MAR

To do whatever you want?

⁴² Someone who doesn't believe in God. A pagan.

MOSLEM

Yeah. Like you.

ME'MAR

I'm not my father's son, if I don't punch you in the face.

ME'MAR wants to attack MOSLEM. SAFDAR holds him.

MOSLEM

Don't let him come closer or I'll kill him and you would be responsible for that.

SAFDAR

Why me?

MOSLEM

Because from the moment we got here you stayed there and didn't say a word. Tell him that this is not only my problem.

SAFDAR

Me'mar, please, don't do that! We haven't done anything yet. We haven't found any buyers yet.

MOSLEM

We will, *inshallah*.

ME'MAR

Over my dead body!

MOSLEM

Your dead or alive doesn't make any difference.

He grabs the tea tray and enters the kitchen.

ME'MAR

Bring him, Safdar! We should give him the sacred soil and water.
Maybe he won't die a kafir.

SAFDAR enters the kitchen. ME'MAR fills a bottle with water.

Light fades.

SCENE SIX

Day time. ME'MAR HANI is sitting next to BIBI and helping her with the nuts and bolts. Suddenly, BIBI looks at him surprised.

BIBI

Who are you?

ME'MAR (smiles)

Your oldest son.

BIBI

How are your children?

ME'MAR

They're fine. They ask about you all the time.

BIBI

Do they bother you, or you are the one to order?

ME'MAR

They don't bother me, and I do not order too.

BIBI

OK! Thank God. How about your wife? Is she caring or does she neglect you?

ME'MAR

God bless her. She died eight or nine years ago.

BIBI

Oh! You've been single for eight years? How could you tolerate that?

ME'MAR

To be honest, I wanted to remarry but it never happened.

BIBI

It'll happen one day. *Inshallah.*

ME'MAR

Inshallah. Pray for that, Bibi.

BIBI

Inshallah. It will.

ME'MAR

Inshallah.

BIBI

Inshallah.

ME'MAR

Inshallah.

BIBI

Inshallah.

ME'MAR

Inshallah.

BIBI looks at ME'MAR as if she is not sure what ME'MAR means.

ME'MAR

I'm tired, Bibi.

BIBI

Of what?

ME'MAR

Of being alone. When Hava⁴³ was alive I didn't know how important that woman was to me. I found it out after she was gone. Too late! Nobody can be Hava for Adam⁴⁴. Neither mother, nor brother and children... Because these people are from your blood. They're too close to you and you can't tell them what's going on in your heart. You can't even distance yourself from them and talk about your feelings. Because kinship makes you timid and uncomfortable. I want such a woman, Bibi.

BIBI

I hear you. You need someone to be your friend.

ME'MAR

Exactly! You're very smart.

BIBI

But you can't find her, even if you spend your whole life looking for her. These kinds of women are rare.

⁴³ Hava in Persian means both the Eve character from the Adam and Eve story, and air.

⁴⁴ Adam in Persian means both the Adam character from the Adam and Eve story and the human being. Here, the playwright is playing with the words Hava (Eve and air) and Adam (Adam and the human being).

They look at each other.

ME'MAR

What should I do, then? What on earth should I do?

BIBI

If you want a woman who could be your friend and fellow in life, you need to be as patient as Jacob. But if you're just looking for a wife, you can find seven or eight women, like catching tadpoles from a puddle.

ME'MAR

Seven or eight? If I mention that to Moslem, Safdar and my daughters, they'll drag my father out of his tomb and burn him in front of me. Do you think I want to buy dowries for my daughters with the grave money? No! I want to get married. I want a young and beautiful woman.

BIBI

With that money you can't even find an eighty-year-old whore!

ME'MAR

Well! How about I stay here and match nuts and bolts with you?

BIBI

Good idea! I swear to God, it's better than digging graves. It brings bad omen and curse. I said that before and I'm saying it again.

ME'MAR

What can I say, Bibi? What can I say...

Both continue matching nuts and bolts. TOUTI enters with a tray. On the tray there is a cup of tea and some money. TOUTI put the tray in front of ME'MAR. ME'MAR takes the money and starts counting. He drinks the tea very quickly.

TOUTI

If you continue doing that, she'll be out of money soon.

ME'MAR

God is great. Bibi is working well, *Mashallah!*

He puts the money in his pocket. TOUTI brings a notebook. She seems embarrassed.

TOUTI

Let me write it down!

ME'MAR

I'll write it down in my notebook.

TOUTI

No, Me'mar! I have my own book.

ME'MAR (gets up)

Go ahead!

TOUTI (reads)

So far, you've borrowed three hundred twenty-five thousand two hundred sixty *tomans* from Bibi. Plus fourteen thousand which I just gave you...

(She is calculating.)

ME'MAR

(looks at his notebook)

How much did I borrow?

TOUTI

Three hundred twenty-five thousand two hundred sixty *tomans* plus fourteen thousand equals three hundred thirty-nine thousand two hundred sixty *tomans*.

ME'MAR

I think it's less. How did you calculate it?

TOUTI

How did you calculate it?

ME'MAR

I've been working with numbers all my life, girl. I know how to count.

TOUTI

No wonder you're broke!

ME'MAR

You were the only one in this house who didn't ridicule me. Thank you, Ms. Touti! Thank you very much!

TOUTI

Don't bargain with me, if you don't want to be ridiculed!

ME'MAR

I'm not bargaining. I'm saying the truth.

TOUTI

Well! Show me your book, if you're not lying! I even mentioned the exact date and time. The only thing I needed was your signature.

ME'MAR

(gets mad)

Are you listening to this girl, Bibi? God be my witness. I never heard such an insulting thing even from a man. let alone a woman...

BIBI

What?

(Looks at ME'MAR:)

Touti is right.

TOUTI

(to ME'MAR:)

If you don't want to pay her back, then don't! Why are you making such a fuss for such a little sum of money?

She closes the notebook, grabs the tray very quickly and leaves. ME'MAR is watching her desperate.

ME'MAR

Oh, God! There're a lot of graves here. Just send your angel of death and kill me so that I gain peace.

VALISHAH who just heard ME'MAR enters excited.

VALISHAH

God forbid! Don't say that, ME'MAR! Now that our dream's coming true. Hi, Bibi. This is Valishah.

ME'MAR

What are you so chipper about? Is Samarghand dead?

VALISHAH

God forbid! If it wasn't for her, we still would have been digging graves like idiots.

ME'MAR

Has she found gold?

VALISHAH

No! How could she? Even Moslem and Safdar couldn't find anything with that machine.

ME'MAR

Then what?

VALISHAH

Don't you want to guess more?

ME'MAR

Yeah. Maybe she is OK with Ayat and Touti getting married.

VALISHAH

She'll be. But wrong guess.

ME'MAR

Then what?

VALISHAH

This morning when we went to the graveyard, Samarghand and I started fighting as usual. Then she said I'm an idiot and I can only count till fifteen and I don't even know how to write my name and this and that.

ME'MAR

Get out of here!

VALISHAH

What she said pissed me off so much

(ME'MAR looks at him surprised.)

and I decided to count all the graves in front of her.

ME'MAR

Did you?

VALISHAH

Of course! I was counting graves all day. Didn't do any work.

ME'MAR

Were you out of your mind?

VALISHAH

No, I wasn't. I was inside my mind. I kept counting and counting until I found out I was close to twenty thousand...

ME'MAR

So what, then? We're almost done.

VALISHAH

No! We've been done for a long time ago but we forgot to keep track of it.

Silence.

ME'MAR

Are you sure, Valishah?

VALISHAH

God be my witness! I counted to twenty thousand. Samarghand and Ayat are still counting the rest which might be two or three thousand, I believe.

ME'MAR

Pretends that he is holding a glass of vodka with a gesture of his hand.

You mean we've done one too many?

VALISHAH

(does the same thing)

Yes! *Be salaamati*⁴⁵!

The talk like two drunkards.

ME'MAR

Let's go and tell the contractor we're done before the deadline. He might pay us more for being early.

VALISHAH

Let's go! Let's go!

TOUTI

Bibi, pray for them to get their money. Don't you see how desperate they are?

⁴⁵ To your health! Cheers!

BIBI

Don't feel bad for them, Touti. This is what they get for digging graves.

TOUTI

I haven't seen you this hard-hearted before.

BIBI

You expect me to show mercy for them. Have they done that for themselves? How many times have I asked them not to dig graves because it makes people heartless and miserable.

(Angry)

Couldn't they just match nuts and bolts like me?

TOUTI

What can I say, Bibi. What can I say.

SCENE SEVEN

SAFDAR, MOSLEM, ME'MAR and SAMARGHAND are sitting on the floor around *sofreh*, waiting for dinner. AYAT is asleep. SAFDAR is reading MOSLEM's cards. BIBI is matching nuts and bolts. TOUTI enters with a knife in her hand. Everybody asks TOUTI why dinner is not ready yet.

TOUTI

They look like stones. This knife can't even go through their skins, and they've been boiling for an hour. You should have asked for something else from the new contractor instead of these rotten potatoes.

TOUTI joins BIBI and helps her.

SAMARGHAND

I wouldn't doubt it from a contractor who asks us such a thing. I swear to God if it was someone else instead of me, she would have killed herself a thousand times over. I wish I could burn myself alive!

VALISHAH

What makes you think he'll give us money if you kill yourself? We have to put our heads together to see how we can do what he's asked us, and get our money.

SAMARGHAND

You, deadbeat loser! Didn't you say if we don't bury the enemies in the graves, we won't get any money?

VALISHAH

I did! But honestly, it's not that bad. The poor guy didn't even mention how many. I think four or five sluggish soldiers would be enough.

MOSLEM

What if he asks us to fill all twenty thousand graves?

SAMARGHAND

Do you have that many soldiers? Let's say he agrees with four or five, how do you want to find four or five soldiers?

MOSLEM

Or even one? It's not that easy. How long do we need to wait for the war to begin, God forbid, and for the enemy to attack us and then get killed? What if nobody attacks us, let's say, in the next twenty years or maybe never and unfortunately peace spreads all around the world. Don't you see how unlucky we are?

SAFDAR

Even if the war happens, unluckily nobody will die!

BIBI

Inshallah, may there be no war and may people live in peace!

VALISHAH

Don't pray that, Bibi! Without war we can't get any money for the graves.

BIBI

Inshallah, Inshallah!

VALISHAH

You want us to die because we did not listen to you and dug graves? We are starving to death.

BIBI

A mother never wants her children to die. But what can a mother do, if the children themselves want to die?

MOSLEM

If you don't like war and you don't want your children to die, pray that twenty thousand soldiers come and sleep in the graves voluntarily. *Astaghfirullah!* Let's go SAFDAR! Talking to these people is a waste of breath.

MOSLEM and SAFDAR get up.

ME'MAR

I talked to the contractor about selling the graves and he said this property has a deed and you cannot sell it, regardless of what you have made on it.

MOSLEM

They own the land and we own the graves. They need to pay us for the graves and take their land back otherwise we will sell the graves and won't give them shit! Let's go, Safdar!

ME'MAR

Where are you going? Sit down, I need to talk to you!

MOSLEM

I want to go and hunt some rabbits or partridges. It seems that your potatoes are not cooking.

ME'MAR

They will, God willing, by the time I am done talking. Maybe, they're cooked by now. Touti, can you go and check on them?

TOUTI gets up holding the knife and enters the kitchen.

ME'MAR

(to MOSLEM and SAFDAR, furious:)

Sit down! Sit down!

(Begging them)

Please, sit down!

They sit down.

ME'MAR

Ayat, come and join us!

SAMARGHAND

Leave my son alone! He needs to sleep.

ME'MAR sits on his knees and so does VALISHAH.

ME'MAR

It's no time for sleep. We have important work to do and we can only do that if we are together.

VALISHAH

What work?

ME'MAR

War!

Everybody looks at ME'MAR surprised. AYAT sits and looks at him. Long silence.

ME'MAR

Not in a bad way. We just need to initiate the war.

(Silence. They are watching ME'MAR.)

Not in a bad way. God forbid, we're not traitors or anti-revolutionary or anything like that. We are one hundred percent sure that we can beat the enemy. We only need to send the rat in to their midst and when they shoot us, our soldiers will attack and destroy them.

(Everybody is silent.)

Or we first make sure our soldiers are equipped enough and then send the rat. How does that sound?

(Everybody is silent.)

Or we will first get permission from whoever is on top and then send it. What do you think?

(Everybody is silent.)

Or... Or... Touti, can you check on the potatoes!

ME'MAR sits back as does VALISHAH. TOUTI exits. AYAT is thinking. TOUTI enters.

All

What happened? Is it ready?

TOUTI
150

No! It's like they're made of steel or iron. Even this sharp knife can't cut them.

AYAT

Maybe we can do something about it.

TOUTI

I don't think so, Mr. Ayat. The flame is high and the water is boiling fast.

AYAT

I'm not talking about the potatoes. The war!

(Everybody looks at him surprised.)

First, we need to find the enemy's nearest headquarters. I just so happened to know exactly where it is.

(He points to the *sofreh*.)

We are here...

VALISHAH

(points to the *sofreh*)

You mean on top of this sumac shaker.

AYAT

If we go fifteen kilometers this way, we reach this hill, exactly where this tomato is. And here is the border.

(He points to the border with a skewer.)

Then, if we go on top of this hill that belongs to us, we can monitor the important parts of their headquarters with binoculars. Then, if we

shoot one bullet, only one, they will definitely send their troops toward the hill we are standing on.

They all look at each other with wonder.

MOSLEM

They'll kill us all.

AYAT

Of course, they will. That's why we need to find a brave person to shoot that bullet. He might get killed but the important thing is that we can fill the graves. That's important!

TOUTI

Why not go to the top of that hill and just swear instead of shooting?

AYAT

I never expected that from you!

MOSLEM

Why not? Ayat used to go there every day and swear but nothing has happened yet.

AYAT (angry)

Shut up non-MOSLEM!

MOSLEM

Fuck off! You can't even do such a simple thing.

AYAT

You do it if you can!

SAFDAR

Why not? I've seen him several times there giving the enemy the finger.

ME'MAR

Shame on you Safdar! Ladies are sitting here.

SAFDAR

He gives the finger and I have to be ashamed?

AYAT

Now you're itching for a fight!⁴⁶

SAFDAR

(moves his hands.)

I'd love wrestling with you like we used to do in the past.

SAFDAR gets up, ready to attack. MOSLEM is chanting and making mouth war noises. VALISHAH gets up to separate them but falls on his back.

VALISHAH

Save your energy for the enemy. Don't waste it like this!

⁴⁶ The Persian expression is "your body is itchy!"

TOUTI

These potatoes are more important than the enemy. If you have any strength come and beat these potatoes. We're starving.

SAMARGHAND

Good job, Touti! Come on, Ayat! Come on! What are you waiting for?

AYAT

OK, mother!

AYAT enters the kitchen and starts beating the potatoes.

SAFDAR

Your mother has always saved you, ever since you were a kid. You never finished wrestling, sissy!

TOUTI

Mr. Safdar, you better go and help, instead of taunting him. We don't have anything else at home to eat. We're young and strong but BIBI might faint.

SAFDAR enters the kitchen and starts beating potatoes.

AYAT's voice

We need help, these are very hard.

SAFDAR's voice

What? Are you already tired? How do you want to fight with the enemy, then? Potato!

SAMARGHAND

Don't mess with my son, Safdar! Or I'll come ruin you!

TOUTI

You don't need to beat up Safdar! If you've got any energy left, you better beat some potatoes.

VALISHAH

She's right, woman! Get up!

SAMARGHAND

Why don't you?

VALISHAH

Will you get up, if I get up?

SAMARGHAND

Yes!

VALISHAH

(gets up)

With your permission, brother!

ME'MAR

Please! Please!

VALISHAH and SAMARGHAND enter the kitchen. Beating gets louder.

ME'MAR

(to MOSLEM:)

Go and give them a hand! Sounds like those potatoes are really hard!

MOSLEM

What war you've started, ME'MAR. Potato war!

He starts to exit.

ME'MAR

Where are you heading now?

MOSLEM

I don't eat potatoes. Going to hunt something and make *kabob*. Even *haram*⁴⁷ meat is better than this contractor's potatoes.

He exits.

ME'MAR

⁴⁷ Forbidden food in Islam.

This boy got nothing from me. He is as stubborn as his mom, Hava, God bless her. I'm afraid he might get into trouble, God forbid!

TOUTI

What is the end of this story, Bibi?

BIBI

You're asking me, Touti!

TOUTI

I'm not sure whether I should laugh at them or cry.

BIBI

Laugh, Touti! If you cry they'll be stuck here forever!

Light fades.

SCENE EIGHT

SAMARGHAND is putting some stuff in a sack. There are one or two filled sacks on the stage. TOUTI opens the tent flap with her sleeves pulled up. She gets out. She seems busy, walking around.

TOUTI

That's fine if you want to leave but you should know where you're heading.

SAMARGHAND

Are you saying that living in this graveyard is a better option. We dug graves, we counted them, looked at them until we looked like the dead ourselves. We're surrounded by graves. Don't you see that? The more we stay here, the more people forget about us. I wish we could plant some trees in those graves. At least our hard work would have paid off. I was raised in a farm and I know how calming trees and plants can be.

TOUTI

Now that we're leaving? Why didn't you do that before?

SAMARGHAND

I guess I never thought of that and now it's too late! If I was that smart, I wouldn't be here in the first place. What a shame!

TOUTI brings tea from the kitchen.

SAMARGHAND

Touti! You and me never had a chance to talk since we got here.

TOUTI

Because you don't consider me a human.

SAMARGHAND

Feeling's mutual. But it's not true. Let's forget about the past and have a heart-to-heart chat... Listen, Touti!...I love you so much, I swear to God!

You're a good girl. You've got all the good things a woman should have and everyman would love to marry you. You're amazing, beautiful, sincere... A great housekeeper. I really mean it. But I wish you had a family or someone too. Someone who could support you and give you some dowry or money. In that case, I'd have been the first one who asked you to marry my son. But right now I don't think you and Ayat are good for each other. You should marry someone who has money and Ayat should marry someone who has a dowry. What I am trying to say is that, please, leave Ayat alone. Don't pay attention to him. Let him forget you.

TOUTI is shocked.

SAMARGHAND

Are you listening? Are you listening? Seems like you are too much in love that you do not hear me bark!

TOUTI put the tray on the bed and helps SAMARGHAND to pack.

TOUTI

What made you think that I'm in love with Ayat? What's he got?

SAMARGHAND

Ayat ... Ayat... he's perfect. Where can you find a more decent person than my son?

TOUTI

And by decent, do you mean someone who doesn't drink, smoke, or steal or someone who seizes the opportunity and takes charge of his life and tries to make a better future for himself?

SAMARGHAND (hesitates)

You're right, Touti. Why isn't he thinking about his future?

TOUTI gives her a meaningful look.

SAMARGHAND

Of course, one takes after his parents. Touti!

SAMARGHAND sits next to her.

TOUTI

Huh?

SAMARGHAND

Those things you said about the future and seizing the opportunity...Where did you learn it? You've been in this family all your life like the rest of us.

We hear sound of a motorcycle.

TOUTI

It doesn't sound like Me'mar's van!

SAMARGHAND

Who comes here except us?

They both go to the back of the stage and look outside the fence. The sound gets closer and closer and stops. After a while, LATIF enters. He has dusty clothes. His face is covered with a chafieh⁴⁸. He looks at the women from behind the fence.

LATIF

Yallah! Salaam Alaikum.

TOUTI and SAMARGHAND cover their faces.

TOUTI

Alaike Salaam, brother. Who are you looking for?

LATIF

The man of the family.

SAMARGHAND

The man of our family is in the graveyard with my husband. What's it about?

LATIF

Safdar and Moslem sent me. They'll be here soon. I had a motorcycle and got here before them.

SAMARGHAND (happy)

⁴⁸ A specific kind of scarf that is associated with Hizbollah in Palestine and Basij in Iran.

Are you the buyer? Please, come on in! Make yourself at home. Touti bring some tea. Will you?

TOUTI enters the kitchen. LATIF looks at her and then goes toward the barrel to wash his face and hands.

SAMARGHAND

Say something, brother! I think I'm having a heart attack. Is this real? I can't believe it. Is it possible that all the prayers are paying off and I'm becoming rich?

LATIF

Nothing is impossible. How long have you been here, sister?

SAMARGHAND

Ask how many graves we have?

LATIF

Many. Indeed!

SAMARGHAND

Too many, brother! Too many! Twenty-three thousand five hundred seventy-five graves. Now, tell me! How do you want to pay? Do you need all the graves or just some? Are you giving us a cheque or cash? You know. It doesn't matter. Just buy this graveyard and pay us with whatever you can. Where is tea, Touti?

TOUTI brings tea. LATIF wants to take the cup from her hand but she puts it on the ground. LATIF picks up the cup and drinks.

LATIF

Thank you!

BIBI'S VOICE

I can hear a stranger's voice. Who is it, Touti?

TOUTI

I don't know, Bibi. A stranger.

BIBI'S VOICE

Oh, my Goodness! Scream! Ask for help!

SAMARGHAND

He's not a stranger. He's going to buy the graveyard. Moslem ad Safdar sent him.

BIBI'S VOICE

Whatever! He's not supposed to talk to you when there's no man here. Go, brother! Go and talk the man of the house. We women don't know what you're talking about.

LATIF

OK, Bibi! After I drink my tea.

SAMARGHAND

That's fine. They'll be here any minute.

BIBI KHAGHAN gets out of the bathroom.

LATIF (gets up)

Yallah, Bibi Khanum!

BIBI

Who are you?

SAMARGHAND

He's the buyer Moslem and Safdar sent.

(Softly to BIBI)

Don't say anything that upsets him or I swear to God I'll kill myself.
He's got money.

BIBI

Please, leave! You can come back whenever our men get home.

BIBI points to the door. LATIF drinks his tea and passes the cup to TOUTI. He puts a cigarette between his lips and exits.

Light fades.

SCENE NINE

LATIF is sitting on the bed. VALISHAH, ME'MAR, SAMARGHAND, MOSLEM and SAFDAR are sitting around him.

ME'MAR

Well. *Bismillah*⁴⁹, Latif khan! Tell me how much do you pay for the whole graveyard?

SAMARGHAND

You can sell your share. I want to sell our share separately. After all, whoever did a better job should get more money.

VALISHAH

I do apologize for her behavior, brother.

ME'MAR

She's right. I can't compare what you and Ayat did to Moslem and Safdar's work.

SAMARGHAND

God bless your parents!

(To LATIF:)

Well, brother. How much do you want to pay for each grave?

MOSLEM

Aunt, don't you want to let us go first? Although you're older and greedier than we are, but we're the ones who found him.

⁴⁹ Meaning in the name of God. Here means come on!

SAMARGHAND

I swear, you two have already sold yours and got your money.

SAFDAR

Not that we didn't think of that. But he wouldn't agree. He said first he wanted to see all twenty thousand graves with his own eyes.

(To LATIF:)

Right?

LATIF nods.

SAMARGHAND

Is that right? What do you want to do with these many graves?

LATIF doesn't show any reaction. Silence.

SAMARGHAND

Why would I care? Just buy them from us and do whatever you want with them. You can fill them if you want.

LATIF

With what?

SAMARGHAND

With dirt.

LATIF

I'm here to fill the graves but not with the dirt.

ME'MAR

You fill them with whatever you want. It's none of our business.

(All agree.)

We've dug twenty-three thousand two hundred and fifty.

SAMARGHAND

Twenty-three thousand five hundred and seventy five.

ME'MAR

What are you insinuating? That I don't know math?

SAMARGHAND

If you knew, you wouldn't dig extra graves.

ME'MAR

It's math. Sometimes people screw it up. Haven't you done that before? At least, we only screwed up a few graves, some people screw up things that...

SAMARGHAND

I don't care what people screw up. Let's discuss our deal! Valishah, come here!

(She switches her place with VALISHAH. To LATIF.)

Our family have twelve thousand seven hundred and twenty seven graves.

SAFDAR

What the hell? You mean you own more than half of the graveyard?

MOSLEM

Even a lot more!

SAMARGHAND

How many have you dug?

MOSLEM

I did six thousand three hundred and forty two. It's all in here.

Takes a piece of paper out of his pocket and show it to them.

SAFDAR

As far as I remember you dug four thousand one hundred and eleven graves. See!

Shows them a paper.

MOSLEM

You know mine too!

SAFDAR

Of course. One should keep an eye on what others are doing first
(He takes more papers out of his pocket.)

Me'mar didn't dig anything. He just observed us. Uncle Valishah's family all together have nine thousand and forty one

(to MOSLEM:)

and you have four thousand one hundred and eleven.

MOSLEM

Well, how many do you have?

SAFDAR

I've dug seven thousand five hundred and thirty four full graves. And five thousand three hundred and twelve and half. I helped all of you with your graves too. It's all in my accounts.

MOSLEM and SAFDAR fight. VALISHAH tries to stop them.

VALISHAH

Now that everybody is talking about his account, let me show you what I have. I have officially registered it, too.

He shows them a paper. Everybody is shocked.

LATIF

What's in that paper that shook you up?

ME'MAR

According to his document, he's done all the digging and you need to talk to him if you want to buy the graves.

SAMARGHAND (surprised)

Valishah!

VALISHAH

Yes, darling!

SAMARGHAND

(looks at him surprised and admiring)

My Goodness! How could I be so blind? You're right. You did all the work. I wouldn't doubt it.

She brings tea for VALISHAH and tries to help him drink. VALISHAH reclines in the corner.

MOSLEM

It doesn't sound like auntie Samarghand. Samarghand, this is Valishah...

SAFDAR

She wouldn't care even if he were a black dog. As long as he's got twenty three thousand graves she loves him. I myself would fall in love with him.

MOSLEM

Me'mar, do you have any document to show him and kick his ass?

ME'MAR

If I was that kind of person, I wouldn't be in this situation.

MOSLEM

Nothing?

ME'MAR

I might have something.

Everybody is waiting. ME'MAR takes some pieces of cigarette pack out of his pocket.

LATIF

Do you write your debt on the cigarette packs too?

ME'MAR

Why are you asking that?

LATIF

Because if you do, you would need to smoke a box every day!

Silence.

MOSLEM

Even this stranger knows about your debt.

LATIF

Valishah, where do you write your debt?

MOSLEM

On ice...

VALISHAH (embarrassed)

I... I... I don't have any debt!

LATIF

Not less than ME'MAR...

SAMARGHAND

Brother, let's not joke about that right now... We have a business to take care of...

LATIF

Of course! That's why I'm here.

SAFDAR

Why are you talking nonsense, then? Tell us how much you want!
Let's haggle!

LATIF

I don't know about the grave market and I don't haggle.

SAFDAR

Well, I ask six thousand for each grave. OK?

LATIF

Yeah. But even with that money you can't pay your debt.

SAFDAR

I can, *Inshallah*. How do you know how much is my debt?

LATIF

I can tell from your face that you've given people a lot of promissory notes, as much as your weight.

SAFDAR

Dammit! Even my face shows it.

LATIF

Well. It seems that you haven't seen a bad creditor yet.

SAFDAR

Not yet. Thank God. At least Me'mar's new job brought us here to hide.

Everybody confirms.

LATIF

Fair enough! Do you have any idea how much interest you have to pay?

ME'MAR (joking)

Too much. We can't even count it.

LATIF

You can pay your debt, then.

MOSLEM

You're asking too many questions. What's in it for you?

LATIF

But it concerns your creditors who paid me to find you and get their money out of you.

(Silence. He holds SAFDAR's neck and pulls a gun out of his own pocket.)

I'm Latif Kharshotor. I get money and find debtors. I'm impatient, crazy, and I kill. I'm here to fill your graves. And if you don't give me fifty seven million seven hundred and fifty thousand, I'll do that.

ME'MAR

Do whatever you want. We don't have that much money.

LATIF

We don't know yet.

He throws SAFDAR.

SAFDAR

Are you blind? Don't you see that we're living here like dogs?

LATIF

That's your plan. Because you don't want people to be suspicious that you're searching for treasures. I've seen that a lot. You people prefer to live in misery and poverty for a couple of years and afterwards line your pocket. What are you looking for? Mummies, jewelry, bronze statues, or pottery?

ME'MAR

You're asking for too much in order to get enough! Huh?

LATIF

And I will!

MOSLEM

You wish! Safdar, go get a sack! Let's tie him up and put him in the sack and send him to where we found him.

MOSLEM wants to attack LATIF. LATIF kicks him in the stomach.

LATIF

You didn't find me. I found you. Fill this *aftabeh* and put it by the bathroom.

MOSLEM does the same. LATIF enters the bathroom.

ME'MAR

(to MOSLEM and SAFDAR)

How many times did I tell you not to go to town and talk to everybody about the graves? Are you happy now?

MOSLEM

Don't worry, Me'mar! I'll send him back. It was our fault and we'll fix it ourselves.

SAFDAR

How about killing him and throwing him in one of the graves. We can tell them he's the enemy and get our money. God sent him to help us.

VALISHAH

This could be a blessing in disguise. That's not a bad idea. This idiot is right. We would benefit twice from killing him.

ME'MAR

Sure! But who is going to do that? It's not easy. We've got to be together.

Light fades.

SCENE TEN

The stage is disordered. MOSLEM, SAFDAR and VALISHAH are sitting in the corner with their hands tied from behind. LATIF holds the end of the rope. SAMARGHAND has fainted. ME'MAR and BIBI are sitting next to each other and looking at LATIF terrified. AYAT is sitting with tied hands. He is furious. LATIF is tying the rope.

LATIF

Hurry up! We've got to get there before the night falls.

ME'MAR

(points to SAMARGHAND)

She's still unconscious. Bibi's still speechless. Besides, I'm not feeling well enough to ride the van. You don't want to give them our dead bodies. Do you?

LATIF

I will if I need to. Get up!

LATIF pulls the rope and they fall. TOUTI enters with a glass of juice/sherbet.

TOUTI

What are you waiting for, then? Pull the trigger and kill us all. Start with that old woman. Maybe you get more reward.

She helps BIBI to drink the juice.

ME'MAR

Don't provoke him, Touti! He's mad. He'll kill and bury us right here and leave.

TOUTI

Where to? This miserable guy needs the little money he gets from finding you.

(To LATIF:)

Isn't this why they hire you? Isn't this how you make money? God damn the money you get from scaring poor debtors to death and ripping them off!

AYAT

Don't talk to him, Ms. Touti! The law will support us. I'm sure the police will arrest him as soon as they get to the town.

TOUTI

I'm sure he's already thought of everything and knows how to get away from the law.

(To BIBI:)

Feeling better?

(BIBI nods.)

I'll take you to the hill to get some fresh air when you feel good.

TOUTI sits next to SAMARGHAND and gives her juice with spoons.
SAMARGHAND regains her conscience little by little.

SAMARGHAND

(notices LATIF and gets scared)

Is he still here?

LATIF

I'm heading out, sister. Get ready!

VALISHAH (begging)

Ayat...

AYAT gets up and LATIF points his gun at him.

LATIF

If you do that again, I'll knock you off in front of your parents! Sit down!

LATIF pulls the men out of the stage. AYAT, TOUTI, and SAMARGHAND watch them leaving from behind the net. The sound of van starting.

LATIF'S VOICE

What are you waiting for, Me'mar?

ME'MAR'S VOICE

I want to make a deal with you!

Light fades.

SCENE ELEVEN

LATIF is standing behind the net with a suitcase next to him. TOUTI is standing next to BIBI KHAGHAN. She's wearing a white *chador*. ME'MAR, VALISHAH, SAMARGHAND, MOSLEM and SAFDAR are sitting.

TOUTI

(to BIBI:)

They're forcing me to marry someone I don't know. They're saying that I'm the only one who can save their lives and stop this disgrace. This stranger isn't going to turn them in and he'll pay the creditors some extra money.

(BIBI shakes as if she is having a bad dream.)

I haven't accepted it yet. I promised you I'd never leave you. But they're saying stuff that scares me to death. They're saying that if I don't marry Latif, they'll kill you and he can take me with him. What should I do? They're saying if I agree to go with Latif willingly and don't tell you, he'll marry me legally and they won't hurt you. Me? Honestly, I'm more worried about you otherwise I prefer to go with this stranger rather than staying with Me'mar and his family. At least, this guy is man enough to kill someone he doesn't like rather than selling her. I told him if he doesn't marry me legally, I'll kill myself. We'll see how much honor he's got. With your permission, Bibi!

She kisses BIBI and hugs SAMARGHAND.

TOUTI

(to SAMARGHAND:)

I trust her to you. Please, don't forget her pills. Tell her stories whenever she wants...

TOUTI Fixes her white *chador* and picks up her bag and without paying any attention to ME'MAR and others who want to say goodbye to her, exits. LATIF follows her. We can hear the sound of LATIF's motorcycle. Sound of thunder. BIBI wakes up suddenly and asks for TOUTI. She runs toward the net and calls TOUTI. ME'MAR HANI gets close to BIBI and wants to talk to her. BIBI looks at him and others with anger that makes him change his mind. BIBI is panting. She sits back in her place.

ME'MAR

He...He might be a good man for Touti. Isn't it what you always wanted?

BIBI gives him a look. ME'MAR is quiet. BIBI goes back to sleep. Suddenly she shakes as if she is dying.

Light fades.

SCENE TWELVE

ME'MAR, VALISHAH, SAFDAR, and MOSLEM are carrying BIBI's coffin behind the fence. SAMARGHAND is following them crying. Light fades.

SCENE THIRTEEN

Light on. Nobody is on stage. We can hear ME'MAR's van getting close. The van stops. AYAT enters. He has some grocery bags and seems happy.

AYAT

Yallah. Anybody home?

(Facing the kitchen:)

Ms. Touti!

(Facing the bathroom:)

Bibi Khaghan! Where is everybody? I fixed the van. It's as good as new. I had the engine be dismantled and the tires be changed. Not to mention the brake, gas pedal, and the clutch. It took the whole day to do all the work. Anyway, you should give it a try. It's like a brand new model.

(He put the bags down.)

Where have you gone all the sudden?

AYAT wants to leave. He sees ME'MAR in a black shirt.

AYAT (surprised)

What happened, uncle?

ME'MAR

My condolences!

He wants to hug AYAT but AYAT steps back.

AYAT

Who's gone, uncle? Why are you wearing black?

SAMARGHAND and VALISHAH enter crying.

VALISHAH

Bibi Khaghan. Your grandma is gone.

AYAT

Why? She was fine.

SAMARGHAND

When death comes, he doesn't ask anything. He just takes anyone he sees on his way.

VALISHAH

Bibi Khaghan wasn't happy with this job. Like she knew something. I wish we'd never come here in the first place.

ME'MAR

Ah! Ah!

SAMARGHAND

We shouldn't stay here any longer.

VALISHAH

Yeah. We should leave as soon as possible.

AYAT

Mother, how did Touti take it?

SAMARGHAND

Touti? Touti...

AYAT

I'm sure she's devastated. Where is she? Is she still mourning over Bibi's grave? Why did you leave her alone? Mother, is that how much you hate her?

(He wants to exit.)

SAMARGHAND

Ayat!

AYAT

I've got nothing to do with you, mother. I want Touti.

(SAMARGHAND and VALISHAH cry.)

If I've waited that long, it's because of the promise I made to that old woman.

(He exists.)

Ms. Touti! Ms. Touti!

MOSLEM and SAFDAR see AYAT outside. They bring him inside and sit him on the bed.

MOSLEM

Touti flew, man!

AYAT becomes nervous.

SAFDAR

Don't scare him!

(To AYAT:)

It's nothing just...

AYAT

Just what?

Grabs his shirt.

SAMARGHAND

Don't say anything, Safdar. I'll tell him.

AYAT

Tell me what, mother? What have you done to her? I swear to God, if you said anything that upset her...

SAFDAR

Upset? They married her to that guy!

AYAT is shocked. He wants to get up but MOSLEM and SAFDAR hold him.

AYAT

Who?

SAFDAR

To that guy Latif.

AYAT

Why?

SAMARGHAND

We had to. He wanted to turn in your father and uncle to the creditors.

VALISHAH

Do you know what would have happened, if they found us? They would kill us before we got to the court.

ME'MAR

It was a legal marriage. She seemed happy too. It's fate... You can find somebody else.

MOSLEM

I know it's hard. But it's all your fault. After all you loved Touti for a long time but you didn't do anything. If you had the courage to propose to her, this would never have happened. If you don't catch the bird who sits on your roof, your neighbors will.

SAMARGHAND

Touti didn't love you enough otherwise she could have been waiting for you. If she told me that she wanted you too, I would have been happy for you guys to get married. But she didn't say a word. She didn't even say goodbye to you.

VALISHAH

She didn't say goodbye to anyone except Bibi and Samarghand. She didn't even look at us!

AYAT

You sold her and expected her to say goodbye. How brutal!

(He wants to leave.)

SAMARGHAND

Where are you going?

AYAT

I have to find her.

SAMARGHAND

That monster will kill you.

AYAT

I only have two options. To find Touti or to kill myself.

ME'MAR

I agree!

VALISHAH

With what? With killing himself?

ME'MAR

No! With killing myself. I've been thinking about it for a long time but I haven't been this willing before. I feel I'm stuck in the bottom of an endless well. Only death can free me!

MOSLEM

Is it you, Me'mar Hani? A man who used to talk about destiny and believing in God in the hard times?

ME'MAR

Living in misery like dogs, trying hard and not getting anywhere, isn't what God wants. It's what his cruel oppressive people want. I'm

tired of these people. I want to leave this world and seek refuge in God. Is that wrong?

VALISHAH

No! Do we have another choice?

(To others:)

Huh? Do we have another choice? If so, let's try it! Bibi was a blessing to all of us. Now that she's gone our life will get worse.

(ME'MAR gets up. VALISHAH after him.)

Let's go, brother! We don't need any knives, or poison or rope. We'll lay down in the graves we dug until we die from hunger and thirst and heat!

VALISHAH and ME'MAR exit.

SAFDAR

We were digging our own graves and we didn't know.

MOSLEM

Did you really think that we were digging for the enemy. Huh? The enemy who has terrified us so much and made us dig graves for them before even they attacked us? Of course such an enemy never existed! And as far as there's no enemy, there's no money. When there's no money it means that we'll die from hunger and end up laying down in their graves. But Safdar, I'll never lay down. I'll sell all these graves at any cost!

MOSLEM exits. SAFDAR follows him.

SAMARGHAND

(to AYAT:)

Ayat, don't follow us! We don't have any choices left except death. It's over for us. We don't care if we go to hell. Hell isn't any worse than here. When you're drowning the depth of the water doesn't matter.

SAMARGHAND exits.

SCENE FOURTEEN

As the stage light is going on, we see LATIF and TOUTI sitting. AYAT brings tea for LATIF. He is in black. LATIF grabs the cup.

LATIF

What are you doing here all by yourself? Digging more graves?

AYAT

No, Mr. Latif. I'm filling them.

LATIF

That's good. You spend one year to dig graves and another year to fill them. Maybe next year you dig them and a year after that fill them again. What an idle person!

TOUTI

At least he admits what they did was useless. Isn't that enough, Latif?

LATIF

Of course! But how is he going to make you happy? That was a mistake to bring her back. At least, I could make enough money to feed her. But I didn't know what to do with her heart. I know how to get money from people not heart! Although, it's not been forty days since Bibi died, but I congratulate you.

LATIF passes the cup to TOUTI. He gets up and takes a bag out of his coat and gives it to TOUTI. He wants to leave.

AYAT

Mr. Latif! You did something for me that my parents never...

LATIF

Where are they?

AYAT

God knows. They slept in the graves for a couple of days with Me'mar. After they didn't die they packed their stuff and left. They insisted that I go with them. But I didn't. When you bury your dear one in a place, you belong to that place.

LATIF

Like something was telling you Touti will be back. No?

AYAT

Yeah. And your heart was telling you to bring Touti back.

LATIF

Latif doesn't have any heart. Only if I could talk beautifully like you...Two youngsters...With empty hands⁵⁰... among these graves...May God himself show mercy on you! Bibi, God bless her, who was kind to anyone and was making *halal*⁵¹ money, not from digging graves, left you. What are these people, who are making the earth a graveyard and who are humiliating you, going to give you? May God himself show mercy on you! Two Youngsters...Alone...without anything...In a graveyard...

LATIF exits. TOUTI opens the bag that LATIF gave her. Inside the bag are some golden bracelets, a necklace, and a ring. light fades.

THE END

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⁵⁰ Meaning nothing.

⁵¹ Opposite of *haram*. Religiously allowed.

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY

Tomb Dwellers is a dark comedy which depicts the socio-economic situation of Iran during the Ahmadinejad administration that was the result of the politicians' bad decisions and governmental corruption. It was staged after the 2009 presidential election that brought Ahmadinejad to office for a second term, an election whose legitimacy was widely disputed, both domestically and internationally. Ahmadinejad not only claimed legitimacy for his second term, but aimed toward global superpower status for Iran and its controversial nuclear ambitions (Ansari 16). This despite the fact that during his presidency, Iran was isolated from the international community and unemployment increased dramatically, leading to increased poverty and national disillusionment. In "Women's Rights and Feminist Movements in Iran," Tohidi asserts:

The neo-conservative and populist backlash under President Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) associated with resurgence of Islamist fanatic groups, over-emphasis on nuclear ambitions, belligerent and provocative foreign policy, intensified hostility between the IRI, Israel and the Western powers, thus an increased danger of military attacks and war, increasing international sanctions and isolation of Iran, increased repression of the media and civil society organizations, including women's groups, introduction of anti-women

bills, increased corruption, economic mismanagement, inflation, and rising unemployment. (*Sur: International Journal of Human Right*)

In this chapter, I set out to do three things: First, I explain how Ahmadinejad's policies affected the nation's life that Kiyani depicts in the play. Second, I examine the symbols and metaphors Kiyani uses to criticize Islamic government and specifically the Ahmadinejad administration (e.g., contractors who symbolize the different governments and presidents who come and go while the socio-economic situation of the country never changes). Finally, I talk about the play's treatment of the situations of women and working class people in Iran, through feminist and Marxist approaches.

In the play Kiyani takes this reality and transposes it into an absurd situation: people are trapped in a graveyard digging in vain. The plot of the play is simple although there are many layers that can be analyzed in depth. The master builder, Me'mar⁵² Hani signs a contract to dig twenty thousand graves for the imaginary enemy. He moves to the desert with his family and after finishing the work, he does not get paid because the enemy does not attack the country and the graves are left empty. So, the family decides to make plans to start a war. After their attempt is not

⁵² Me'mar means master builder or mason

successful, they sleep in the graves themselves for a few days, awaiting their own death. When it does not come, they arise and set off for a new, unspecified future.

We become familiar with the setting and the characters through conversations between women: Bibi,⁵³ Touti and Samarghand. The family consists of Hani's mother Bibi and her adopted daughter Touti, Hani's sons Safdar and Moslem, Hani's brother Valishah, his wife Samarghand and his son Ayat. The names of the characters have specific meanings that are important in understanding the play. For example, in Farsi Touti means "parrot," which stands for a companion and someone who speaks sweetly. She is Bibi's adopted daughter who repeats the story of Me'mar Hani and his family over and over, like a parrot, for Bibi who suffers dementia as Bibi's doctor suggested. Hani means kind, sympathetic and compassionate. He is a typical Iranian father, who sees himself responsible for the family. However, he has not been successful in making his family happy. Moslem or Muslim means a believer, a peaceful person; someone who surrenders himself to God. He is the one who questions God and Me'mar Hani's "superstitious" belief about destiny. Safdar stands for a brave person and a warrior. However, he is dependent on Muslim and never has the courage to express his opinions or to change the current situation. For him the only solution is to leave. Valishah consists of the word Vali and Shah. Vali means a

⁵³ Grandmother

friend, companion and a guardian; a person who obeys and takes order without any complaint. According to *Dehkhoda Farsi Dictionary*, Shah has been derived from the Sanskrit word *Sadhu* (meaning saint or monk). In Farsi shah means king, master or god. Shah is supposed to be god of the nation. Also, Shah is a person who has the higher rank in Sufism; master, teacher, monk and noble (Shah is also a surname in Central Asia). In my opinion, shah in Valishah has a spiritual meaning suggesting a monk or master who is the people's guardian. Valishah is Me'mar Hani's companion who always copies Me'mar, even his gestures. Although Valishah pretends that he respects Hani, who raised him, his hypocrisy is revealed when the loan shark shows up. Valishah brings a document that says the graveyard belongs to him. At that moment, everybody notices that he has already betrayed Me'mar. Samarghand symbolizes the city Samarkand in today's Uzbekistan, which was known for its greenery, gardens and beauty. It was destroyed by Ghenghis Khan, the Mongol conqueror, in the 12th century.⁵⁴ Ayat means a sign, miracle, evidence, omen and a verse in Quran that is marked by a number and finally, Latif, the violent loan shark, means gentle and soft. As my analysis will show the character's actions are the opposite of their names.

⁵⁴ It was conquered and rebuilt by Timur (Tamerlane) in 13th century.

The setting and time are unknown. It can be anywhere and everywhere near the enemy which threatens the country. Like so many of the orders by the contractors, the characters are driven to act based on lies and manipulation. They assume that they are digging graves for their neighbor country who has not yet had any plan to attack. They have been told they need to wait for the enemy to start the war; otherwise, the graves are useless. However, during war the bodies of the enemy soldiers have to be sent back to their country and could not be buried in the home country according to the international law.⁵⁵ We do not see the contractors and are not aware of what Me'mar and contractors talk about. Did they (the contractors) literally say the enemy was going to attack or it was just what Me'mar and others assume? Is this imaginary enemy internal or external, i.e. are the contractors going to bury the foreign enemy or the political dissidents in twenty thousand graves? Who hired them? Is it the regime? Invisible hands?

In the beginning of the play, the family are praying after Ayat before going to work. The specific prayer is one that Muslims read in times of hardship to ask help from their God: "Who listens to the (soul) distressed when it calls on Him, and Who relieves its suffering, and makes you (mankind) inheritors of the earth? . . . May your

⁵⁵ Sometimes the enemy dead are buried in mass graves

mercy be upon us, oh the most merciful” (Quran, Surah Ant, 62). Ayat, who claims he is working only to please God, strongly believes in the prayers saying:

AYAT

The human being is the only creature of God who has so much hope and patience...

Moslem represents the modern intellectuals, who protest and condemn the present situation, and is doing his best to save the family. He plans to start a fire in the nearest town in order to fill the graves. He wants to buy a bus and work as a driver to make money. He goes to the town to find a buyer. For him “end justifies the means.” He does not believe in destiny and, unlike what his name implies, he blames Me’mar and God for their misery and poverty toward the end of the play:

MOSLEM

What else should we have done? Have we not prayed and cried enough every Friday night, Thursday morning, Monday evening, Wednesday sunset after your bastard nephew? Have we not prayed to be able to pay back our loans and success in work, all the while ignoring the blisters on our hands? Have we not asked this poor old woman to pray for us day and night and nothing happened?

(He points at TOUTI and BIBI.)

Look! Obviously, they're still praying for our happiness and no God is listening to them....

ME'MAR

I don't have anything to say to you. You're not a Muslim anymore, Moslem. Even looking at your face is a sin!

Throughout the play Moslem is disappointed with Me'mar Hani, his father who is supposed to be a hero, and accuses him of cowardliness.⁵⁶ Safdar is a conservative intellectual and although he agrees with Moslem he is afraid to express his ideas. The only option for him is to escape. He believes in determinism when he says:

SAFDAR

You're his certified copy, and you're not aware of that. You know what? Misery and poverty are genetic. Children inherit that from their fathers. Nobody can stop this chain.

Poverty and hopelessness divide the family and make them forget their values. According to Imam Ali, the successor of the prophet Muhammad, "when the poverty

⁵⁶ Ahmadinejad, in his attempt to renew the old values, filled the cities with the pictures of the leaders and the war heroes. However, during his time, the population lost hope in ideals, values and heroes.

enters from one door, the faith exits from another.” Poverty leads Me’mar, who pretends to be a real believer, to decide to attempt suicide, although suicide is considered to be a sin in Islam. After trying so hard to get money from the contractors at the cost of “sending the rat” and starting the war, Me’mar who condemns Moslem for speaking heresy and being *Kafir*, loses hope. Me’mar Hanı symbolizes a typical father who is being judged and blamed by his own children throughout the play. As a compassionate father and the head of the family, who has not yet been able to provide dowries for his daughters, Me’mar, unable to save his family, becomes emasculated and powerless:

ME’MAR

No! With killing myself. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time but I haven’t been this willing before. I feel I’m stuck in the bottom of a big hole. Only death can free me!

MOSLEM

Is it you, Me’mar Hanı? A man who used to talk about destiny and believing in God in the hard times?

ME’MAR

Living in misery like dogs, trying hard and not getting anywhere, isn’t what God wants. It’s what his cruel oppressive people want. I’m

tired of these people. I want to leave this world and seek refuge in God. Is that wrong?

The big hole is the graves they are digging, the hopeless political situation, and the personal effects on the characters. Me'mar, the literal builder/mason who is also a victim of the system, after being interrogated and questioned unfairly, disappears along with Valishah and Samarghand.

Women, Power and the Working Class

Hussein Kiyani concerns himself with issues of the working class and women in this play, as he has in his other plays. Up until the Pahlavi dynasty, women didn't have the right to vote and go to school. They were supposed to stay at home, cook and raise the children. In some parts of Iran, people still believe in that. They are victimized, exploited and suppressed by the patriarchal society. Samarghand says regarding Touti's exploitation by Me'mar's family:

SAMARGHAND

No! The thing is that she acts as if nobody knows how much work she and her sons are making this poor girl do for them and how much trouble they drag her in. She has been working like an ass since morning.

The clergy also encourages people to go back to their roots and to believe in what the religion says about women. According to Tohidi:

The era of Islamist Revolution and Islamization (1979–1997) associated with massive socio-political mobilization of men and women, but soon followed with many retrogressive and discriminatory laws and policies against women and religious and ethnic minorities, forced hijab, sex segregation, war and violence, political repression, massive emigration and exile of intellectuals and ordinary people, and overall socio-economic decline. (“Women’s Rights and Feminist Movements,” *Sur*)

Numerous articles in the country’s Civil Code effectively undermine protections for women against domestic violence. A woman cannot leave the matrimonial home without the husband’s permission unless she is able and willing to go to court to prove she is endangered or she is not subject to maintenance. Article 1108 states, “If the wife refuses to fulfill the duties of a wife without a legitimate excuse, she will not be entitled to the cost of maintenance.” And Article 1114 states, “The wife must stay in the dwelling that the husband allots for her unless such a right is reserved to the wife.” Article 1105 of Iran’s Civil Code states, “In relations between husband and wife, the position of the head of the family is the exclusive right of the husband.”

Bibi being raised in such a society, strongly believes in that. Like other women in Iran, Bibi is a victim of the patriarchal society. She believes that women are not allowed to talk to the men/strangers. She asks Latif to “Go and talk to the man of the house. We women don’t know what you’re talking about.” She was not raised to be independent and had to marry five times in order to be protected by men.

BIBI

Me marrying five times was not because I enjoyed being with different men. I needed to do that because I was poor. Tell them Touti!

TOUTI

(while collecting the dishes)

When Mash Jabrael, her first husband and ME’MAR Hani’s father died, he didn’t leave them any money. That’s why BIBI had to get married to the first person who proposed to her. He was a man of God, named Ali Hasan Hamoomchi. He raised Hani.

Bibi’s predicament is reflected in the critical feminist and Marxist works of the 1970s that turned our gaze toward performative gender norms. In this patriarchal society women are, as Spivak puts it, “subalterns.” Judith Butler in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” argues that gender identity is an act which is both “socially shared and historically constructed” (909) and, as it is conditioned by social

conventions, it is political. Foucault also talks about the relationship between the gender identity and power. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler points out:

Within *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I, Foucault appears to locate the quest for identity within the context of juridical forms of power that become fully articulate with the advent of the sexual sciences, including psychoanalysis, toward the end of the nineteenth century. (135)

In her book *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir asserts that: “One is not born a woman; one becomes one” (301). Judith Butler later expanded this notion to gender itself: “it enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” and is governed by disciplinary social conventions (“Performative Acts” 907).

The gender roles in the play also indicate both the shadow, persistence, and disappearance of time. Bibi has dementia and the only person she remembers is Touti, her adopted daughter. Bibi represents the past that is fading. Touti has to repeat the story of their life (history) every day that others refuse to listen to, and as George Santayana says “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Or as Edmund Burke says about the French revolution: “People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.”

Throughout the play we see Samarghand complaining about Me’mar, the incompetent head of the family and the main reason for her misery. In the first act, Samarghand reveals the reason for her hatred of Me’mar:

BIBI

What's her problem with Me'mar Hani?

SAMARGHAND

For thirty-five years, Me'mar Hani has dragged that miserable Valishah like an orphan child from one city to another and has made him work like a workhorse and has never paid him a penny...

...Not even once has Me'mar Hani acted like a brother to give Valishah the chance to pick up the trowel or put bricks on top of bricks to let him learn some masonry, so he could get out of working in the mud, and all the hard labor, and to make a bit of money. He has stuck himself to Valishah like a thorn and doesn't let him go and be able to provide for himself. Once you get stuck in your brother's mud, you have no way out. You have to wait there until the doomsday.

Moreover, living in the desert for a year and not getting any rewards makes her depressed. As Ayat says to Touti, "She used to work hard but since the contractors started breaking the deal and didn't give us any money, she became depressed. She sleeps a lot because she does not want to overthink." Being raised in a farmer family and in nature, at the end she wishes they had plant trees in the desert instead of digging for the dead. She symbolizes the splendid city, Smarakand, which was

destroyed. Samarkand was ruined and pillaged by Ghenghis Khan much like Samarghand's life is ruined by Me'mar and Valishah:

SAMARGHAND

(matching nuts and bolts together)

Nothing. We're both beating a dead horse. Her memory will go away and never comes back. My cries will go nowhere but return to me. The miserable Me'mar Hani and the stubborn Valishah will be like this forever, a slap on the face. That's all. Something is burning.

While Samarghand represents splendor and the glorious past, she also displays other qualities important to understanding the subtext of the play. She is greedy and opportunist, who sees Ayat as an omen; an opportunity and means for her happiness. She is the only person in the family who is against Ayat marrying Touti merely because their marriage does not benefit Samarghand. Despite all the hatred she has for Me'mar, she welcomes Me'mar's idea of selling Touti to Latif, the loan shark. Samarghand makes every effort to find money. Her last chance, before attempting suicide, is to find Ayat a wealthy wife even at the expense of his happiness. However, she fails and at the end disappears as if she never existed much like women in patriarchal society, whose identity and existence are ignored.

Nevertheless, Touti, the most powerful woman in the family, is forced to marry Latif in exchange of Me'mar's debt. What Samarghand and Me'mar do here, is not out of cruelty but poverty, despair and misery of the whole family that is supposed to be solved by paying the debts.

TOUTI

(to BIBI:)

They're forcing me to marry someone I don't know. They're saying that I'm the only one who can save their lives and stop this disgrace. This stranger isn't going to turn them in and he'll pay the creditors some extra money.

(BIBI shakes as if she is having a bad dream.)

I haven't accepted it yet. I promised you I'd never leave you. But they're saying stuff that scares me to death. They're saying that if I don't marry Latif, they'll kill you and he can take me with him. What should I do? They're saying if I agree to go with Latif willingly and don't tell you, he'll marry me legally and they won't hurt you. Me? Honestly, I'm more worried about you otherwise I prefer to go with this stranger rather than staying with Me'mar and his family. At least, this guy is man enough to kill someone he doesn't like rather than

selling her. I told him if he doesn't marry me legally, I'll kill myself.

We'll see how much honor he's got. With your permission, Bibi!

Luce Irigaray in "Women on Market" argues that what assures social order and symbolic order is the fact that women like commodities are circulated and exchanged among men. This exchange and "passage from nature to culture" (171), has guaranteed the "foundation of the social, and cultural order, whose organization has been prescribed by the patriarchal system (165). Without this trade we fall into anarchy. In "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex," Gayle Rubin argues that "men consolidate power and form alliances among and between themselves through the ritualized exchange of women in marriage" (N. Goldstein, *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*). Most forms of sociocultural endogamy exclude women from subject status and turn them into objects for economic reasons, i.e. making them "Others." Men desire to exchange wealth and property among themselves. This makes women values; use value and exchange value. Use value means they produce children and labor. By exchange value, Irigaray means men can earn money and gold by selling women.

These values that are natural and constitutional respectively make women's possession by men indispensable. So, their bodies are materials that support price and value. What estimates their value is men's "speculation." Men give women value

according to a standard value that is established based on their desire. Mother, virgin, prostitute are social roles that assigned to woman by men. Rubin argues:

Since the political and economic power that passes through a woman and to her male kin is never actually available to her, these transactions fix woman's status in patriarchal heterosexual culture as an object rather than a subject: even the woman who "chooses" her marital partner still has no choice but to be transacted within a system of power that uses her body as its basic medium of exchange. (N. Goldstein, *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*)

Unlike Lacan, who believes women cannot produce a discourse, Irigaray argues that commodities speak. They have dialects that men cannot comprehend. She argues that women always try to copy the father and resemble him; they mimic father's language. One example here could be Touti, who was raised in an uneducated family but is a knowledgeable woman. Although Touti is considered a commodity, she has power/ discourse; she has resisted the patriarchal society all her life and does not let an opportunist person like Me'mar take advantage of Bibi. Her resistance as a subordinate subject was degrading for Me'mar, who is trapped in another power network run by the contractors. On the other hand, as "women are mirror of and for men" they are the threats for "misappropriation of masculine power: the phallic mirage" (Irigaray 94). For example:

TOUTI

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Well! Show me your book, if you're not lying! I even mentioned the exact date and time. The only thing I needed was your signature.

ME'MAR

(gets mad)

Are you listening to this girl, Bibi? God be my witness. I never heard such an insulting thing even from a man. And you're a woman...

However, "In themselves, among themselves, they are amorphous and confused: natural body, maternal body, doubtless useful to the consumer, but without any possible identity or communicable value" (Irigaray 188). Touti, trapped in the system of power relations imposed by the society, at the end, "confused about her identity," goes with the loan shark.

Butler asserts: "for Foucault the category of sex is thus inevitably regulative, and any analysis which makes that category presuppositional uncritically extends and further legitimates that regulative strategy as a power/ knowledge regime" (*Gender Trouble* 122). Power lies in the social constructs, in a group of relations, and the people who function within that construct acquire the use of its power and are in the privileged position to exercise it, but only as long as they are in its reign.

Foucault's analysis can be brought to bear directly on the Iranian context. He viewed *Khomeinism* as a possible positive revolution early on. In "Hamartia: Foucault and Iran 1978–1979," Johann Beukes argues:

Foucault's perspectives on power, revolt, Otherness, "political spirituality" and his "ethics of Self-discomfort" may prove to be as significant for an understanding of our world today as the author considers them to have been during the events of September 1978 to April 1979, with Tehran's self-esteem still radiating in the desert skies 30 years later. (1)

Foucault believed one of the reasons of the Islamic revolution's victory, was the charismatic leader and its "political spirituality." He also called Islam the "soul of the soulless" or "The Spirit of a Spiritless World." However, when Foucault became disappointed with the Islamic revolution and its charismatic leader, for repression, execution of the yesterday's enemy and political opponents, he asserted: "Islam as a political force is an essential problem for our epoch and for the years to come" (Janet Afary, "Revisiting Foucault and the Iranian Revolution"). In *Khomeinism*, Abrahamian studies the power relations in Iran after the revolution. He asserts:

Khomeinism, strikingly like other populisms, elevated its leader into a demigod towering above the people and embodying their historical roots, future destiny, and revolutionary martyrs. Despite all the talk about the people, power emanated down from the leader, not up from the masses. Thus the title

of imam should be seen not as purely religious but as the Shii-Iranian version of the Latin American El Lider, El Conductor, Jefe Maximo (Chief Boss), and O Paid do Povo (Father of the Poor). (39)

However, Foucault never mentioned the Iranian women's movements and demonstrations against compulsory hijab and unfair Islamic laws that revolutionists imposed, unlike what French feminist, Simone de Beauvoir did⁵⁷ after the International Women's Day demonstration on March 8, 1979 that lasted for five days.

If feminism is concerned with the gender inequality, i.e. subordination and repression of women by men, Karl Marx challenges the class and economic inequality. Both Marxism and feminism struggle against oppression and exploitation. Marx in "Grundrisse" criticizes the way Capitalism considers political economy based on concrete elements such as population. Thompson asserts:

In the writings of Marx and Engels and on through Lenin and Western Marxism (Georg Lukács and on up through Louis Althusser), Marxists analyze capitalism as a total system, offering an elaborate theory of the social whole, in an analysis that crosses traditional disciplines and discourses,

⁵⁷ After support demonstrations also took place in Paris, Simone de Beauvoir issued a statement of solidarity on March 19, 1979: "We have created the International Committee for Women's Rights (CIDF) in response to calls from a large number of Iranian women, whose situation and whose revolt have greatly moved us... We have appreciated the depth of the utter humiliation into which others wanted to make them fall and we have therefore resolved to struggle for them." (qtd. in Afary)

drawing together economics, political theory, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology. (*Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*)

Marx argues that the abstract elements of wage-labor, money, value and demand when established by abstract reasoning lead us the concrete whole which is combination of many determinism and relations. Society is a developed organization which exists based on “possession relations and property.” He asserts: “The more simple category can serve as an expression of the “predominant relations” of an undeveloped whole or of the “subordinate relations” of the more developed whole” (“Grundrisse” 652).

In “German Ideology” he argues that humans either own property and wealth or else work for subsistence (working for just enough for today to require working the next day in order to eat the next day), and these primary activities concretize existence and establish physical and social relations. For example, the contractors who are replaced each time Me’mar goes to get money, give various excuses to avoid paying him. Making him and his family work and paying them with little food which is not even edible, the contractors keep family digging and deprive them of their freedom; i.e. what Marx calls “objectification.” The following dialogues between Valishah and Me’mar highlights this relation and tension:

VALISHAH

Should I tell them, Me’mar?

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(ME'MAR laughs.)

Here you go! He said tell them but slowly. He doesn't want you to be surprised. His laughter this morning meant that he was very happy to go get the money and this laughter means that this contractor didn't pay him a penny like the others and asked for something new. Am I right, ME'MAR?

ME'MAR exits the bathroom.

ME'MAR

The new contractor said he won't pay us until we finish all the work!

In "Wage Labor and Capital," Marx introduced the notion that exploitation of the labor power is the necessary condition for capitalism. For him, "economic wealth and social power are in the hands of a few as the many must work for the few who own the corporations and factories, the means of production" (Thompson, *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literary Theory*). Workers sell their labor power, not just their labor, to employers. Labor power is distinct from the "labor" alone because the term accounts for the life-activity of the worker and the social relations of production. Let us go back to the play. The contractors, like any other capitalists, do not give the characters a chance to benefit from their own labor. When the contractors find out that

they are thinking of finding buyers and selling the graves, they say that they cannot sell the land/property that does not belong to them:

ME'MAR

I talked to the contractor about selling the graves and he said this property has a deed and you cannot sell it, regardless of what you have made on it.

MOSLEM

They own the land and we own the graves. They need to pay us for the graves and take their land back otherwise we will sell the graves and won't give them shit! Let's go, Safdar!

In short, the material conditions of existence precede and dictate humans' expressive, spiritual, and ideological understandings. The play highlights this fact through the characters' change of personality and ideology from the beginning to the end. Moslem becomes *Kafir*, as Me'mar calls him. Me'mar becomes suicidal. Touti agrees to marry Latif. Latif, unable to win Touti's heart, brings her back to Ayat.

MOSLEM

You shut up! Our life won't get any worse. Because this is the worst situation ever: living at the end of the world for a year. Digging thousands of graves for free and having no money in your pocket.

And like wretched dogs looking for buyers. None of those motherfuckers willing to buy the graves and pay. And hearing your coward father nagging you all the time. Could it get any worse?

This humiliation of the father figure exists in dialogues between Valishah and Me'mar when they talk about their fathers. When talking about their fathers, Valishah says:

VALISHAH

My brother's father was a local builder in Ahwaz. The building fell on him. My father was crushed under the stable ceiling. We were trying to save the sheep and the cows when my father passed away. It was too late to save him. Let's not open the old graveyard! Me'mar, what do you want to do with your money?

Here the commodity, something that is exchanged in market, is more valuable than people (unless you happen to be a woman who is an expensive commodity herself).

Conspiracy, Power, and Subversion

Throughout out the play we encounter a kind of conspiracy theory. There is a dispute over who has dug more graves. When characters are showing their documents

to Latif to prove that how many graves they have dug, suddenly Valishah reveals his paper:

VALISHAH

Now that everybody is talking about his account, let me show you what I have. I have officially registered it, too.

He shows them a paper. Everybody is shocked.

LATIF

What's in that paper that shook you up?

ME'MAR

According to his document, he's done all the digging and you need to talk to him if you want to buy the graves.

This is an important scene, where everybody takes off his/her mask metaphorically and shows his/real face. Here is when Samarghand suddenly turns his back to others and pretends that she, as Sadar says, "is in love" with Valishah. Here is when Valishah turns his back to Me'mar and betrays him. And finally, here is when we find out that others are in debt too. Even Latif does not believe that they are really poor:

LATIF

That's your plan. Because you don't want people to be suspicious that you're searching for treasures. I've seen that a lot. You people prefer to live in misery and poverty for a couple of years and afterwards line your pocket. What are you looking for? Mummies, jewelry, bronze statues, or pottery?

Since Qajar monarchy, Iran has been betrayed by opportunists, such as, Britain, Soviet Union and the United States. The most scandalous one was the coupe of 1953 by CIA and MI6. This coupe has provoked the theory of conspiracy in Iran. Mosaddeq, prime minister of Iran during the Pahlavi dynasty, nationalized oil in 1951. The British, refusing to accept it, doing their best to discredit Mosaddeq, called him mentally unstable. Abrahamian points out:

It is therefore not surprising that the 1953 coup gave rise to conspiracy theories, including cloak and dagger stories of Orientalist professors moonlighting as spies, forgers, and even assassins. Reality — in this case — was stranger than fiction. These conspiracy theories were compounded by the fact that some Western academics did their best to expurgate from their publications any mention of the CIA and MI6 in the 1953 coup. (123)

Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution, accused enemies of distorting the true message of Islam. By enemy he meant the West, Jews and Bahais, nationalists, liberals, the Left, for being spies and controlled by Israel and United States. According to him the West and colonialism controls schools, radio and television, journals and the publications to poison the youth and spread the false notion of Islam. Ayatollah Khomeini accused colonial conspiracies of having kept “the country poor and backward, exploited its resources, inflamed class antagonisms, divided the clergy and alienated them from the masses, caused mischief among the

tribes, infiltrated the universities” (Abrahamian 121). Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the present supreme leader of Iran, uses the word “enemy” frequently in his speech, so much so that the word is used as a joke by many Iranians. In the play we have:

SAFDAR

We were digging our own graves and we didn't know.

MOSLEM

Did you really think that we were digging for the enemy. Huh? The enemy who has terrified us so much and made us dig graves for them before even they attacked us? Of course such an enemy never existed! And as far as there's no enemy, there's no money. When there's no money it means that we'll die from hunger and end up laying down in their graves. But Safdar, I'll never lay down. I'll sell all these graves at any cost!

This enemy as Moslem says, is imaginary; a delusion that is not even a threat but is necessary in ruling the society. It is just the fear of the enemy/creditors that keeps the characters continually digging. As Moslem says, “the creditor is always hopeful and the debtor is fearful. As long this hope and fear exist, there is a risk.” As long as there is digging there is a hope to live and to be free. Although for the characters war is not important (because they have nothing to lose), the important

thing, as Ayat says, is to sell the graves and to get rid of the creditors, who are following them. Thus, as we understand from Moslem's monologues, war means money and money means freedom. However, even after they get rid of the creditors and get their freedom back, their "hollow life" does not change.

Ahmadinejad also used to blame "the enemy" for the economic problems (or indeed all problems) in Iran. For instance, in September 2012, *Reuters* reported: "Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has accused his country's enemies of enacting a sinister plan to create a drought by somehow destroying the rain clouds before they reach Iran" ("Ahmadinejad says enemies destroy Iran's Rain Clouds-Reports").

Awareness of this fragility and the paranoia it engenders led to further excess in pursuit of the promise of a utopian future, itself demanded by a public yearning for an escape from the trials of the present. (Ansari 2)

This vocabulary provokes the conspiracy theory that foreign powers control the local politicians. According to Abrahamian, "the message is that the intelligent observer should ignore appearances and focus instead on the hidden links; only then can one follow the plot, understand the hidden agendas, and identify the true villains" (111).

Here we can see a connection between paternalism (with a father figure on the top of the power pyramid: the Leader, or Me'mar) and populism (the government, or

the contractors) both in the play and in the society.⁵⁸ The regime in a period of a poor economy need to keep the people relatively fed to avoid revolution, on the one hand, and protect the people from outside forces seeking to weaken or take advantage of the country on the other. These absurd conditions lead to the strange lives and actions of the people, which is what the play is trying to get the audience to realize.

In the play, the contractors pay Me'mar with a sack of rotten potatoes to make him continue working/digging their own graves. They accept the potatoes hoping that next time they will get the reward the contractors have promised. The potatoes refer to Ahmadinejad's practice of giving out sacks of potatoes to his poor supporters before the election in 2009. Populism has been practiced by Iranian politicians both before and after the revolution. Ayatollah Khomeini praised Islam as the religion of the oppressed and barefooted people. For him the message of Islam is "Liberation" and "social justice," not just for Iranians and Muslims but also for the "oppressed people of the world" no matter what their religion and nationality are (Abrahamian 31).

TOUTI

They look like stones. This knife cannot even go through their skins.

They've been boiling for an hour. You should have asked for

⁵⁸ We should distinguish between the Supreme Leader who calls himself "Father of the Nation" and the government/president.

something else from the new contractor instead of these rotten potatoes...

MOSLEM

What war you've started, Me'mar. Potato war!

(He wants to exit.)

ME'MAR

Where are you heading now?

MOSLEM

I don't eat potatoes. Going to hunt something and make *kabob*.
Even *haram*⁵⁹ meat is better than this contractor's potatoes.

Ahmadinejad was elected in 2005 on a platform of populist economic reform. "He promised to put the rewards of his country's vast oil wealth on the dinner tables of its people and root out corruption" ("The Populist's Problem" *Economist*). Mir-Hussein Mousavi, the leader of the Green Movement and main Ahmedinejad's opponent in the 2009 election, challenged the official narrative of the populists. Robert Dreyfuss, in *The Nation*, asserts that "Mousavi's main position on economic

⁵⁹ Forbidden food in Islam.

policy was to denounce Ahmadinejad's limited handouts to poor and rural Iranians" ("Ahmadinejad's Red Tide"). Even the Green Movement supporters ridiculed Ahmadinejad chanting by "Death to Potatoes!" In their protests after the election of 2009. Ansari asserts that:

He is lauded for his apparent popularity and his common touch with ordinary people, yet his presidency has nevertheless evinced some of the most repressive tendencies of any since 1979. His thirst for popular acclamation and determination to represent the "common man" are matched by an almost equal distrust of that man's vote at the ballot box. (2)

This is one in a series of examples that show how the regime maintains power/legitimacy through absurd, hypocritical or harmful means which are elaborated in the play. One of the "successful strategies" for the system is "division of the nation." In the other words, to "divide and conquer," i.e. to weaken, isolate, manipulate and dominate them. In the play, Moslem and Ayat are the only people who have already gathered information and come up with some tactics to start a war, however, both lack courage to do it:

MOSLEM

I've asked around. There are thirty or forty thousand people in this town. Among them are two families, who hate each other and fight all the time...

SAFDAR

...Are you thinking of sparking a fire and making them kill each other to fill the graves?

MOSLEM

Yes! Yes! But I'm afraid.

SAFDAR

You're afraid! Huh! Let's have another joint maybe the fear goes away.

Lack of pragmatism is a key concept in the play. Ayat, the most religious and moral man of the family who leads the prayer's ceremony (in Islam only men can lead this specific ceremony), pretends that he is working only to "please God." He is the first person who thinks about war and has already found the enemy's headquarters. However, he is afraid to volunteer and shoot the first bullet. He is a utilitarian who is not pragmatic. For him the important thing is to "find a brave person to shoot [the first] bullet. He might get killed but the important thing is that we can fill the graves. That's important!" Again, "end justifies the means."

Toward the end of the play, the theme of women and land are connected. Women and lands are considered honor for Iranians, however, at the end they even agree to sell Touti. Bibi dies and they realize that their misfortune is because they

forgot the past and didn't listen to Bibi. Now that Bibi is gone, hopeless Me'mar, Valishah, Samarghand decide to sleep in the graves. They do not care about the consequences of their choice. Samarghand says to Ayat: "hell isn't any worse than here. When you're drowning the depth of the water doesn't matter." Moslem and Safdar are still looking for buyers hoping to sell the graves and change their destiny. In the final act, Latif brings Touti back, seeing Ayat filling the graves. Ayat, who is still attached to the past and traditions, says he will not leave the desert because Bibi is buried there.

AYAT

God knows. They slept in the graves for a couple of days with Me'mar. After they didn't die they packed their stuff and left. They insisted that I go with them. But I didn't. When you bury your dear one in a place, you belong to that place.

Poverty and hopelessness result in moral and religious uncertainty in the characters. Poverty brings despair and moral corruptions: lies, hypocrisy, murder and dishonor. In Me'mar's family people do not take responsibilities and accept whatever comes as their destiny. For them there is no escaping destiny. They are opportunist, delusional, divided and irresponsible. Although all men are in debt, they blame Me'mar for their misery. When everybody finds out that Valishah has already registered the graveyard, Me'mar says, in response to Moslem's question:

MOSLEM

Me'mar, do you have any document to show him and kick his ass?

ME'MAR

If I was that kind of person, I wouldn't be in this situation.

Here is when we sympathize with Me'mar and realize how hypocrite and ungrateful Valishah, who sees Me'mar as his father, is.

Latif is the most violent character who is hired by the creditors. At the end we find out that he is the only honest and honorable person in the play, who, as Touti says is paid to find the debtors. He is soft and kind inside as his name implies, and does not force Touti to live with him. Latif negates the commodification by bringing Touti back to Ayat and at the same time giving her gold to make her future.

Tomb Dwellers is an example of many Iranian plays that depict the socio-economic and political crisis in Iran. From the beginning of the play we are introduced to an absurd situation; people who are trapped in a desert digging (graves). Throughout the play we learn how the working class and women are oppressed by the bourgeois contractors and men respectively. After finding out they have been digging graves in vain, they disappear like a mirage in the desert. The only people who remain are Ayat and Touti who promises she would never leave Bibi. *Tomb Dwellers* symbolizes Iran, a land that becomes more and more like a graveyard; a wasteland which is inhabited by people who suffer humiliation, hopelessness, emptiness and nothingness. As Latif says:

Latif doesn't have any heart. Only if I could talk beautifully like you... Two youngsters... With empty hands... among these graves... May God himself show mercy on you! Bibi, God bless her, who was kind to anyone and was making *halal* money, not from digging graves, left you. What are these people, who are making the earth a graveyard and who are humiliating you, going to give you? May God himself show mercy on you! Two Youngsters... Alone... without anything... In a graveyard...

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

One of the roles of the translator is to transfer meaning and culture of the source text into the target text; i.e. besides introducing the text and the writer we have to introduce the culture of the source text to the new audience. Throughout the history of translation, Western translators tried to make the texts Westernized, i.e. easy for the access of their Western audiences who assume the source language culturally, linguistically and politically subordinate, inferior and Other. Apter asserts:

For translation, especially in a world dominated by the languages of powerful economies and big populations, condemns minority tongues to obsolescence, even as it fosters access to the cultural heritage of “small” literatures, or guarantees a wider sphere of reception to selected, representative authors of minoritarian traditions. (4)

After 9/11 the need for the specialists who can translate and decode intercepts and documents for the sake of protecting national security became clear. Before that less attention was paid to other global languages which have been shifting the balance of power in the production of world culture (Apter 3). With the increase of terrorism and war in the Middle East, translation gained major political and cultural roles.

Islamists and Marxists in Iran gathered together to overthrow the Shah because they believed he was too dependent on the West, specifically the United States and Great Britain, both of whom planned the coup of 1953 that brought the

Pahlavi dynasty back into power. After the Islamic revolution in 1979, Western art and culture were condemned and consuming them was forbidden. Western music, theatre, movies and fashion were considered a plot from the West to corrupt the youth. As a result, Western theatre and cinema have been always subject to censorship. Moreover, Iranian books, plays and movies that talk about Western culture and ideology as well as criticize the Islamic government, have always been censored. In this situation writers and artists are condemned to self-censorship and using techniques such as creating absurd plays, going to the past and using signs and metaphors which have to be decoded by the audience.

In my interview with the Iranian directors and playwrights they were reluctant to talk openly about their works or admit that they were having hidden messages conveyed only through self-censorship techniques. The importance of the self-censorship techniques became apparent after the election 2009, when another fundamentalist and oppressor president came into power and put the nation's Reformist candidates, Mir Hussein Mousavi, eventually the leader of the opposition and the Green Movement in the post-election unrest, and Mehdi Karroubi along with their wives under house arrest. All those people, except Karroubi's wife, have been put under house arrest since 2011. At that time even wearing green cloths or bands or using green elements in theatre and art were forbidden.

I was working at a film distributing company and our job was to send Iranian movies and documentaries to the different international channels and festivals. In 2009, I was lucky enough to quit my job. Afterwards, I heard the company was closed and our boss was arrested for sending a documentary about Khamenie to a foreign channel. Many offices and companies were closed and many people were arrested and disappeared. We couldn't go out of our houses even for shopping. My family asked me to go back to my hometown in the south because it was far from the capital and I was safer. When I was walking by the Ministry of the Internal Affairs, I would see people sitting on the ground before the building and carrying candles and asking "where their votes were." Some stared at each other like ghosts, some were crying.

It is a shame that those foreign reporters didn't know what we were saying. While I along with a group of other people were escaping from the cops, I saw a group of reporters standing in the alley. I shouted: "you see what happened to us!?" But they were just watching us. I was not sure whether they had an interpreter with them or they were going to show the videos they captured to a translator abroad. I wondered how they were going to cover the news without having any knowledge of the language, society and the young generation's demands. Or, how much could the

translators outside of the country convey the messages just from watching the videos?⁶⁰

On the other hand, anti-government opportunist parties such as Mujahidin and Loyalists were using the situation for their own purposes which was change of the regime and ruling the country. They were using the world's lack of knowledge of language and culture only to justify their policies. That movement attracted the world's attention, especially Westerners, for whom Iran has always been a concern after the revolution, whether it was because of human rights violations or our oil and other benefits.

In the days of the demonstrations we would hide in the garages, cinemas or coffee shops and wait for the cops to leave. That was a chance to watch movies or discuss politics and exchange news. One of my habits at that time was to go to theatre with my friends and hang out with people who had the same ideology as mine. Hopefully, the City Theatre would still be open and there were a few comedies on stage.

⁶⁰ I remember a story about a political mistranslation, which if it didn't happen the future of the revolution might have changed. In February 1979 when Khomeini was going back to the country by France Air, and some foreign reporters and his friends and aides were with him. In response to the BBC reporter's question on what he was feeling about going back to Iran after 14 years of exile, Khomeini responded "hichi" (nothing). One of his aides, Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, translated the word "hichi" to "no comment." The reporter, astonished, repeated "no comment?" and the translator responded "no comment."

One day my friend in Tehran invited me to go to *Tomb Dwellers*' performance with him. The playwright and the director, Hussein Kiyani, was his close friend. *Tomb Dwellers* along with other Iranian and foreign comedies were appealing to the audiences because they had political and social implications that the censorship officials couldn't guess or maybe they could but let them go on stage anyway. After all, many of the officials, representatives and security police members were Reformists and supporting Mousavi, the Prime Minister of the Islamic government during Iraq-Iran war (I know that because my father was once a politician and he knew who his politician friends were supporting).

I had done research on the theatre of Argentina for my master's thesis and translated two plays by Griselda Gambaro about the Dirty War and the disappeared people. However, when one of the well-known directors (I don't mention his name here) found some similarities between the two countries' political situations and wanted to stage *The Walls* on 2010, the government officials banned it saying it was not appropriate. As Phyllis Zatlin in *Theatrical Translation and Film Adaptation* says: "Prestigious foreign texts have frequently been adapted both by those in power in order to reinforce their ideology and by those opposed to repressive regimes as a means of subverting censorship" (9).

Fortunately, scholars like Diana Tylor, Jean Graham-Jones and Marguerite Fietlowitz have done a lot of research on the Argentinian drama. When I went to the

US to pursue my PhD I said to myself if I couldn't translate Argentinian plays for the stage in Iran, I could translate Iranian plays for Western audiences. That's why for my first experience I chose *Tomb Dwellers* which had not yet been translated into English or any other languages. I knew my task was very critical. I had to be careful not to put the playwright in danger by analyzing the play and decoding the signs for the public. I read many reviews of the play and all the critiques only touched upon the psychological and existential aspects of it. And I thought that United States was the least open to other cultures. However, I felt that it was very important to introduce the creative Iranian plays to the US audiences and make them aware of the society and the culture especially during the crisis time and the tensions between Iran and the US government and all the anti-Muslims rules and Islamophobia which only make Iranian people pay. I found out that unlike what I was first thinking, that Americans are not interested in the other cultures, there are many people in the US who are curious and interested in knowing what was/is going on in the Middle East.

To know your audience, their culture, and the subjects that appeal them is one of the important tasks of a translator. Az Zatin asserts: "Among the conflicts translators will face is the discrepancy between acceptable subjects in the source and target language" (12). Francine A'ness discovers "Border Anxiety," i.e. something that's beyond the translator's control. For example, when you translate between two different cultures you should keep the target audience in mind for they have different values, cultural assumptions, perceptions and memories. A'ness gives the example of

the adaptation of the Sabina Berman's play *Between Pancho Villa and a Naked Woman* by Ruben Garfia in the US. In this performance, Pancho Villa is "emptied of significance" and it became a "caricatured made-in-America" Mexican man (qtd. Zatin). The play has been appropriated by foreign groups and audiences (both in the US and Canada).

In the process of the translation I tried to answer to the following questions: What strategies am I using in translating a metaphoric play? 2. Which one is more important; readability or performability?

At first, I planned to stage the play with the help of MFA Directing and Acting students. My goal was to improve the translation and check the enunciation of the words with the cast. I would ask the group to read the dialogues out loud. If the phrases or words I chose were not easy to pronounce, I would change them. Moreover, I wanted to see their perceptions of the source culture and the message of the playwright. The play was aimed to be staged in Arizona on the border of the US and Mexico. However, after the American presidential election in 2016 and Trump's Muslim ban, I decided to go back to my country and therefore, I focused on the text rather than the performance.

But in my short time with the cast, we focused on Scene 7, and I found out some interesting things. For example, they wanted me to keep much of the cultural content and Iranian expressions, and use footnotes to explain them. It changed my

opinion about footnotes. I always thought people do not appreciate reading footnotes because it is an interruption. It was true both regarding American expressions too. If I needed to change the Iranian ones to Americans, they asked me to put the original ones in the footnotes.

Another thing that they were asking was to change some American expressions and proverbs to make them more contemporary with what American young people say today. They wanted me to give each character his own language based on their characters and tones. A major challenge for the translator of theatre, as Joanne Pottlitzer points out, “is to give each character in the play an individual voice” (103). We agreed that sometimes expressions and tones need to be shown with gestures especially because the play does not have any instructions. Maybe one of the reasons for not including the scene instructions is that the playwright, Hussein Kiyani, directed the play himself and the play I have is his own copy, not a published one. (My attempt to find the video of the production was also unsuccessful.) I realized that I was not only a translator but a dramaturge who was obliged to give information regarding the characters, the Iranian different generations, superstitions, religions, give information, the biography of each characters (although I didn’t have them in the play but I could remember from the stage production I saw in 2009), biography of the playwright and director, and the analysis. As Szilvia Naray-Davey asserts: “the translated drama text needs to embrace a dramaturgical fidelity, that of performability and dramatic tension” (259).

In this translation I tried to strike a balance between two cultures. In his response to the question of “How “American” should you go?” Michael Evans says: “as a translator you want to have at the ready the full arsenal of expressions that American English has to offer, but you don’t want the translation to pull the audience out of the experience” (7).

Knowing both the source and the target culture is the important, inescapable, and incomplete basis of all intercultural translation. I have the privilege of being Iranian and of having lived in the US. I know my work as a translator is not finished here. The more I travel, the more I know people and their cultures. The more I get knowledge, the more I can improve as a translator. Zatlin calls translators “confirmed masochists” who deal with too much conflicts and frustrations (7). “Translation is always after Babel.” It is forever compelled to acknowledge the finite limits of language, the multiplicity of different tongues. To function authentically, therefore (Richard Kearney xvii). Translation is “the limitless and irreducible bounds of poesis—that is: the importance of making.”

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