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**Poetics of Experience
Based on the Example of Persian Carceral Narratives**

Abstract

Though recent sprawling of prison memoirs in Persian literature is undoubtedly enhanced by historical reasons, still one should remember that captive themes cherish a long tradition in Persian literary discourse, which can be traced back to the beginnings of the New Persian lyrics and epics. The present paper focuses on the inherent narrative potential of carceral experience and the Persian genre of *habsiyye* (the carceral), in particular.

Keywords: Persian literature, prison narratives, *habsiyye*, heroic monomyth

To my Professor, Anna Krasnowolska

A carceral or prison narrative, in general, is “an account of life in prison by a prisoner, or a representation of prison life by those wishing to illuminate incarceration or employ its metaphoric impact”.¹ Prison narratives may be non-fictional or fictional. They range from collections of poems, letters, autobiographical excerpts, interviews, human rights reports, testimonies and documentaries, to novels, short stories, films or television series. Though “prisoners’ autobiographical reflections may be written, spoken, drawn, painted, tattooed, sung, filmed, etc.”,² the present paper will focus on expressions of carceral experience in literature, and the Persian genre of *habsiyye* (the carceral) in particular.

As a preliminary remark, it should be stressed that though, apparently, prison writings represent a transgressive mode of discourse, by no means have they been written in Persian

¹ Patricia E. O’Connor, *Prison narratives*, in: *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory*, David Herman, Manfred Jahn, Marie-Laure Ryan (eds), Routledge, London & New York 2008 (first published 2005), p. 467.

² *Ibidem*.

by common criminals or the crime underworld. This stems from the fact that confinement was not stipulated as a penalty by classical Islamic jurisprudence and, therefore, was mainly carried out to punish political insubordinates.³ Therefore, as Rebecca Gould notices, imprisonment did not bear a social stigma⁴ and since medieval times Persian carceral narratives have been articulated merely by political prisoners, representing the intellectual elites, mostly poets and writers. More recently, especially after the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979, prison memoirs and testimonies have also been written by the *non-literati* who survived the prison ordeal and wish to share their stories, give testimonies and work through carceral trauma. The proliferation of ‘prison writings’ (*zendān negāri*), mostly memoirs (*xāterāt-e zendān*), written by Iranians in the last fifty years, is undoubtedly intertwined with Iran’s tumultuous political history and the impact of Western testimonial literature.⁵ Still, one should remember that themes of captivity have a long-standing tradition in Persian literary discourse,⁶ and, in fact, appear at the very beginning of New Persian literature, both in lyrics and in epics.

Thus, in the exordium (*nasīb*) to one of the first fully preserved Persian *qasides*, *Mādar-e mey* (“The Mother of wine”), composed by the ‘Adam of poets’, Rudaki (d. 941), the process of wine fermentation is metaphorised as prison suffering. The poem starts with the verses:

مادر می را بکرد باید قربان بچه ی اورا گرفت و کرد به زندان

It behoves thee to sacrifice the mother of wine [the vine]
To seize her daughter and throw her into prison.⁷

³ See: Rebecca Gould, *Prisons before Modernity: Incarceration in the Medieval Indo-Mediterranean*, “Al-Masāq”, 24:2 (2012), p. 181; Irene Schneider, *Imprisonment in Pre-Classical and Classical Islamic Law*, “Islamic Law and Society”, 2/2 (1995), pp. 157–173.

⁴ Gould, *Prisons before Modernity*, p. 182.

⁵ Cf. Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1999, p. 14.

⁶ The scholarship on Persian carceral narratives focuses on classical *habsiyye* and prison poetry composed until the Revolution of 1978–1979. See: the two-volume comprehensive monograph on Persian prison poetry by Vali-allāh Zafari published in 1985–1986 (1st volume) and 2001–2002 (2nd volume); also the illuminative work on the formative stage of *habsiyye* by Ekaterina Akimushkina published in 2006 (see: Bibliography). More recently, Rebecca Gould has published several articles on Medieval *habsiyye* in Persian and written a thorough study on some aspects of carceral rhetoric and *habsiyye* as a discursive genre (see: Bibliography). The post-revolutionary prison narratives are collected and studied mostly by Iranians on exile, like Monire Barādarān or the prominent Iranian writer, Šahrnuš Pārsiur (both authors of prison memoirs). In my research, I concentrate on the dynamics of Persian prison themes and the carceral mode from the beginning of Persian literature, with an emphasis on classical *habsiyye* and modern prison memoirs.

⁷ Zabihollāh Safā, *Ganj-e soxan* (“The treasures of speech”), vol. 1, Entešārāt-e Dānešgāh-e Tehrān, Tehrān 1960–1961, pp. 3–4. An English translation after Edward Denison Ross, see: Edward Denison Ross, *A qasida by Rudaki*, “The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland”, 2 (April 1926), pp. 230–231. For the Polish translation of this exordium by Władysław Dułęba, see: Władysław Dułęba (trans. and ed.), *Dywan perski*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1977, pp. 24–26.

Grape juice, personified as the vine's baby (arguably a daughter),⁸ is locked in a narrow prison (*zendān-e tang*). It remains there stupefied and bewildered (*xire, heyrān*) for seven days and nights. Then, when it regains consciousness, and realizes its state, it 'seethes and sighs (*nālidan*) from [the depths of] its burning heart (*del-e suzān*)', 'it turns topsy-turvy (*zabar-zir*) from sorrow (*qam*)', and then 'from its exuberant grief (*anduh-e jušān*) it is turvy-topsy (*zir-o zabar*)'. It brings up foam (*kafak bar-āvardan*) with anger (*xašm*) like a drunken camel. Then, the guardian (*mard-e haras*) appears and clears away its foam. When, in the end, the captive 'subsides and moves no more', the careful warden (*mard-e negahbān*) closes the door firmly. Finally, the prisoner settles down altogether and becomes pure: the grape juice undergoes a transformation into a mature, fine wine. Carceral suffering is thus represented as an elixir that entails a metamorphosis, a refining of the subject into its purest (or perfected) essence.

On the other hand, in the Iranian epos, *Šāhnāme* ("The Book of Kings"), concluded by Ferdousi at the beginning of the 11th century, prison sufferings are cast in the narrative of a trial faced not only by a captive himself, but also involving his beloved, relatives and natives. The most famous prisoner of the Iranian epic, Bižan, is a man of valour (*razmzan*) descended from the house of the mythical hero, Kašvād. Having bravely fought wild boars that invaded Armenia, he is tempted by his companion, Gorgin, to go to the hostile land of Turan. There, he falls in love with Maniže, the daughter of the Turanian king and the arch-enemy of Iranians, Afrasiyāb. When Afrasiyāb learns of the romance of his daughter with an Iranian knight, he wants to hang him, but eventually sentences him to prison (*zendān*), which turns out to be a dark well or a pit (*tārik-čāh*), called the well Aržang (*čāh-e Aržang*), situated in the middle of the forest. His hands in chains (*zanjir*) and his neck in an iron collar (*qal*), Bižan is suspended head down (*negun andar-afgande*) inside the well, in order not to see the sun or the moon, and the opening of his pit is covered by a famous heavy stone, which the *div* Akvān had wrenched from the depths of the sea. The prisoner, however, is attended (*zavāri mišavad*) by his beloved, Maniže, who, exiled by her father, wanders 'naked' (*barahne*, i.e. without a veil) and barefoot from day to day, moaning (*navān*) and begging bread, which she passes to her lover through a crevice. In the meantime, Bižan's father, Giv, receives news of his son's death, which he finds hard to believe. His sorrow makes the Iranian king, Key Xosrou, look for Bižan's plight in the magic cup, *jām-e jahān-namāy*, and the wretched couple is finally rescued by Rostam, the main Iranian hero.⁹

The existence of an extended carceral vocabulary in the early New-Persian literature as well as vivid depictions of carceral torments, testify not only to a long tradition of

⁸ E.g. Julie Scott Meisami, *Poetic Microcosmos: the Persian qasida to the end of the twelfth century*, in: *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa 1. Classical Traditions and Modern Meanings*, by Stefan Sperl, Christopher Shackle (eds.). E.J. Brill, Leiden–New York–Köln 1966, p. 141.

⁹ See: [Abo-l-qāsem Ferdousi], *Šāhnāme-ye Ferdousi. Matn-e enteḡādi*, Evgeni E. Bertels (ed.), vol. 5, Izdatel'stvo Nauka, Moscow 1967, pp. 6–85. For the Polish translation of this story, see: Lucjan Siemieński (transl.), *Biszen i Menisze. Ustęp z Firdusiego poematu: Szach-namech* (Bižan and Maniže. An excerpt from Ferdousi's poem *Šāh-nāma*), Księgarnia I. Klukowskiego, Warsaw 1855.

Iranian penitentiary system but also imply the awareness of Persian poets of the inherent narrative potential and significance of the captive experience as such. This literary potential has been explored by later Persian poets who uttered their own carceral experience in an autonomous genre, called *habsiyye*.

Habsiyye is not defined by classical treaties on poetics.¹⁰ The term is derived from the Arabic word *habs*, which means ‘prison’; therefore, in a broad sense, it may refer to any literary piece devoted to the carceral experience. However, judging by morphological clues, the term *habsiyye* seems to have originally designated a ‘sub-genre’¹¹ of the *qaside* (an Arabic form or formal genre introduced to Persian literature), namely the ‘prison *qaside*’, and in the strict meaning may denote a sort of poem sharing its structural features. Therefore, according to the most rigid definition of the term, *habsiyye* is “a *qaside* which is composed by a poet in prison or in reference to one’s imprisonment”.¹² The evidence of elegies called *habsiyyāt* in the 10th century Arabic poetry, which precedes the existence of the preserved literary traces of this genre in New Persian, seems to confirm this genealogy.¹³

Still, it cannot be claimed with certainty that the antecedents of Persian carceral poetry lay in Arabic literature. Quite the contrary, judging by the evidence of prison themes in early New Persian poetry, it seems plausible that, despite Arabic labelling, verses on captivity may have had pre-Islamic roots, similar to other New Persian literary genres with Arabic names, notably feast poetry and the glorification of wine (*xamriyye*) or threnodies (*marsiyye*), to mention but a few. Such a hypothesis is put forward, for example, by Konstantin Alexandrovich Inostrantsev, who suggests that prison elegies may have been performed as petitions or apologies before the Sasanian rulers during Now Ruz festivals.¹⁴

Hence, it comes as no surprise that in the field of Persian classical literature, *habsiyyāt* are conceived, by and large, as ‘poems of captivity’, regardless of their prosodic structure. This generic term first appears in the 12th century work on court professions, popularly known as *Čahār maqāle* (“Four Discourses”), written by Nezāmi-ye ‘Aruzi-ye Samarqandi.

¹⁰ Persian classical treaties on poetics do not offer a definition of *habsiyyāt*, though ‘poems of captivity’ are quoted by Rašīdo-d-din Vatvāt (d. 1182–1183) in his 12th *Hadā’eq al-sehr fi daqā’eq al-še’r* (“Gardens of Magic in the Subtleties of Poetry”), to illustrate the use of rhetorical figures. See: Rašīdo-d-din Vatvāt, *Hadā’eq al-sehr fi daqā’eq al-še’r* (“Gardens of Magic in the Subtleties of Poetry”), by ‘Abbās Eqbāl (ed.), Dār al-Mo’allemīn-e ‘Āli, Tehrān 1929–1930, p. 82.

¹¹ On the polemics with such a classification, see Rebecca Gould, *The Persian Rhetoric of Incarceration and the Genesis of a Genre on Islamic Borderlands*, s.l., s.d., Viewed 20 September 2017, <<http://studylib.net/doc/8063626/>>, pp. 41–81.

¹² Such a narrow rendering is given, for example, by Mohammad Mo’in, see: Mohammad Mo’in, *Farhang-e fārsi* (“A Persian Dictionary”), 6 vols, Entešārāt-e Amir Kabir, Tehrān 1992–1993, vol. 1, p. 1338.

¹³ The pioneer of the *habsiyye* genre in Arabic literature is Abu Firās Hamdāni (10th century), the author of *al-Rūmiyyāt*.

¹⁴ Konstantin Alexandrovich Inostrantsev, *Sasanidskie etyudy (Etudes sassanides)*, Kirschbaum, St. Petersburg 1909, p. 90; Ekaterina Akimushkina, *Zhanr habsiyyat v persoyazychnoi poezii XI–XIV vv. Genezis i evolyutsiya*, Izdatelstvo Natalis, Moscow 2006, p. 16.

Its author claims that no ruler can do without poetry, which guarantees the perpetuation of his good name, and, thus, good poets should be appreciated by their patrons. In this light, he quotes a genuinely Persian form, a quatrain (*robā'i*),¹⁵ and a *qaside* sent by the imprisoned poet, Mas'ud Sa'd Salmān (ca. 1046–1121) to the Qaznavid sultan, and criticizes the addressee for not being affected by his subject's verses:

All wise and impartial critics will recognize what rank Mas'ud's *poems of captivity* [*habsiyyāt*] hold in lofty feeling, and what degree in eloquence. Sometimes, when I read his verses, the hair stands on end on my body, and the tears are like to trickle from my eyes.¹⁶

The above mentioned royal prisoner, Mas'ud Sa'd Salmān, is regarded as the pioneer of *habsiyyāt* in Persian literature. His mastery of this particular genre is based both on his outstanding poetic talent and unrivalled (at least among Persian poets) carceral experience, which made him conclude in one of his laments:

تا مرگ مگر که وقف زندانم	تا زاده‌ام، ای شگفت، محبوسم!
در محنت و در بلای الوانم	یک چند کشید و داشت بخت بد
بگرفت قضای بد گریبانم	چون پیرهن عمل ببوشیدم،

Ever since I was born, wonder I am a captive;
 see, till the day of my death I am dedicated to prison.
 As soon as I first put on my back the shirt of labour
 evil fate seized hold of me by the collar.¹⁷

In fact, the poet was about forty when the 'evil fate seized hold of him by the collar' and since then he had languished for 18 years in the remote Ghaznavid fortresses of Su, Dahak, Nāy and Maranj.¹⁸ He enumerates them in one of his more accurate autobiographical accounts:

¹⁵ The author of *Čahār maqāle* calls the quatrain generally, *do-beyti* (quatrain), with no reference to its specific metrum. See: Nezāmi 'Aruzi Samarqandi, *Čahār maqāle*, by Mirzā Mohammad Qazvini (ed.), E.J. Brill, Leiden 1910, pp. 70–71; for an English translation see: Edward G. Browne (transl.), *The Chahār Maqāla ('Four Discourses') of Nidhāmi- i- 'Arūđi-i-Samarqandī*, "Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland", Oct. 1899, p. 779; Browne, *Revised Translation of the Chahār Maqāla (Four Discourses) of Nizāmi-i 'Arūđi of Samarqand, Followed by an Abridged Translation of Mirzā Muḥammad's Notes to the Persian text*, Luzac & Co., London 1921, p. 50.

¹⁶ Browne, *Chahār Maqāla*, p. 779; Browne, *Revised translation*, p. 50.

¹⁷ *Divān-e Mas'ud-e Sa'd-e Salmān*, Mohammad Mahyār (ed.), Pažuhešgāh-e 'Olum-e Ensāni va Motāle'āt-e Farhangi, Tehrān 2011–2012, p. 430. Transl. by Arthur John Arberry, see: Arthur John Arberry, *Classical Persian Literature*, George Allen and Unwin, London 1958, p. 82.

¹⁸ All of them identified in present-day Afghanistan. See: Sunil Sharma, *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier: Mas'ud Sa'd Salmān of Lahore*, Permanent Black, Delhi 2000, p. 24.

مانده بندی گران چنین بر پای؟!	من درین حبس چند خواهم بود
پس از آنم سه سال قلعه نای	هفت سالم بکوفت سو و دهک
من بر او مانده همچو مار افسای	بند بر پای من چو مار دو سر
که ببندم در این چو دوزخ جای	در مرنجم کنون سه سال بود
دیده از درد بند خون پالای	ناخن از رنج حبس روی خراش

How long shall I stay in this prison
with heavy fetters on my legs?
Seven years of my life was wasted [lit. pounded] in Su and Dahak,
then three years in the fortress of Nāy.
The fetters on my legs are like a two-headed snake,
I am staring at it like a snake charmer.
I have been captive for three years in Maranj,
in this place like a hell.
The anguish of captivity makes my nails harsh my face,
the pain of chains makes my eyes shed blood.¹⁹

Mas'ud's 'hair-raising' poems of captivity were followed and developed by some other defiant court poets (or ex-court poets) from the 12th till the 20th century (albeit mostly from the 12th century), like Xāqāni Šervāni (ca. 1122–1190), Falaki Šervāni (12th century), Mojiro-d-din Baylaqāni (12th century),²⁰ and more recently by Mohammad Taqi Bahār (1884–1951). Their classical carceral laments were uttered in various verses, such as the *qaside*, the *qat'e*, the quatrain, and the *qazal*.²¹

What seems to be a tautology but, nevertheless, deserves emphasis, is a specific literary habitat of composing classical *poems of captivity*, namely the fact that they

¹⁹ *Divān-e Sa'd-e Salmān*, pp. 550–551. (Transl. by Rusek-Kowalska).

²⁰ More information on their life and poems of captivity, see: Zafari, *Habsiyye dar adab-e fārsi. (Zendān-nāme-hā-ye manzum)* ("Habsiyye in Persian literature. Prison poetry"). Vol. 1. *Az āqāz-e še'r-e Pārsi tā pāyān-e Zandiye* ("From the beginning of Persian poetry till the end of [the rule of] the Zandiye [dynasty]"), Enteshārāt-e Amir Kabir, Tehrān 1996–1997 (1st ed. 1985–1986); Zafari, *Habsiyye dar adab-e fārsi. (Zendān-nāme-hā-ye manzum)* ("Habsiyye in Persian literature. Prison poetry"), vol. 2. *Az āqāz-e doure-ye Qājāriye tā Enqelāb-e Eslāmi* ("From the beginning of [the rule of] the Qājār dynasty till the Islamic Revolution"). Enteshārāt-e Amir Kabir, Tehrān 2001–2002. On the controversy over whether Mojir's *habsiyyāt* were the product of his personal experience or vivid imagination, see: Gould, *Persian Rhetoric of Incarceration*, p. 131.

²¹ The last famous Persian Poet Laureate (*Maleko-š-šo'arā*) and prisoner was Mohammad Taqi Saburi, known as Maleko-š-šo'arā Bahār (1884–1951), appointed to the Imam Rezā shrine in Mašhad, by the Qajar king, Mozaffareddin-šāh (1896–1907). He was the author of prison poems in the form of *qaside*, *qat'e* and *qazal* but also wrote a long narrative carceral poem in *masnavi*, *Kārnāme-ye zendān* ("The Book of Prison Deeds"). On the comparison of the *habsiyyāt* of Bahār and Mas'ud Sa'd Salmān, see: Sa'id Qašqāyi, *Tangnā-ye habs* ("Prison's impass"), "Majalle-ye Zabān-o Adabiyāt-e Fārsi-ye Dānešgāh-e Āzād-e Eslāmi", 2/4, winter 2011–2012, viewed 20 September 2016, <http://www.sid.ir/fa/VEWSSID/J_pdf/6004513900407.pdf>.

were composed in prison, which in pre-modern times was usually situated in a far-away mountain fortress. Thus, a poet-captive described his carceral anguish not only for the cathartic function of poetic expression, but in order to win freedom. His depictions of suffering, affliction, hardship, trials and tribulations (*mehnat*, *balā*, *dard*) were, therefore, usually rhetorically elaborated, figurative and highly hyperbolic.

The theme (*darun-māye*, *mazmum*) of classical *habsiyyāt* encompasses descriptions of the darkness, ugliness and hardness of a prison cell; the harshness and burden of chains and shackles on the wrists, ankles and around the neck (*qal o zanjir*); the poet's deplorable appearance, physical and mental torments, such as the experience of confinement, alienation, loneliness, longing for relatives; the suspension of time, insomnia, freezing cold and scorching heat, famine or disgusting food; the bestiary of 'xrafstra' or demonic creatures, like fleas (*keyk*, *kak*), lice (*šepeš*), mosquitos (*paše*), bugs (*sās*), mice (*muš*); and wickedness of prison wardens (*kutvāl*, *negahbān*, *pāsbān*, *mard-e haras*, *mir-e mahbas*, *qalāvor*).

The prison itself is often compared to a hell (*duzax*), a grave (*gur*), a black, narrow pit (*siyāhčāl*, *somj-e tang*), sometimes a trial or a set of tribulations that the epic heroes had to undergo (*emtehān*, *haft-xān*). It may also be described as a nest (*āšyāne*), high in the mountains and not suitable for a beautifully singing nightingale, *bolbol*, i.e. the poet. The poet's bed, a straw mat (*hasir*), stones (*hasā*) or a threadbare carpet (*zilu*) may resemble the mouth of a whale (*kām-e nahang*) or be cold, wet and glutinous (*časbnāk*) like a leech (*zālu*), whereas his cushion is the paw of a lion (*panje-ye šir*). Chains and shackles are often compared to a mountain of iron (*kuh-e āhan*) or snakes (*mār*), dragons (*eždehā*) and mad dogs (*sag-e divāne*) biting the poet's legs and devouring him. His warden is almost always a demonic creature, like the epic tyrant, *Zahhāk*, ugly as a pig with an off-putting face (*xuk-e karih-ruy*). As for the poet's body, it is thin like a reed (*nāy*), a stalk of bamboo (*šāx-e xeyzarān*), a single silk thread (*tār-e parniyān*), or a needle (*suzan*) and his heart is like the eye of a needle (*češme-ye suzan*). The poet-captive may be humpbacked like St. Mary's thread, which is bent in two (*čun rešte-ye Maryam do tā*)²² or free-standing and alone like the needle of Jesus (*suzan-e Isā*).²³ His weakness may be paralleled with that of a bamboo (*xeyzarān*); his eyes resemble two gutters of blood (*az xun do nāvān*) and his face is as yellow as saffron or amber (*kah-robā*), while his weight is that of a single straw (*kāh*). He dreams of a piece of bread or a simple sour soup (*sekbāj*) but cannot boil it, because the only fire around ...is his

²² Christian tropes and vocabulary characterize the famous 'Christian' *habsiyye* of Xāqāni, *Tarsāyiye*, dedicated to the Byzantine Emperor, Andronicus I Comnenus (1183–1185), see: *Divān-e Xāqāni-ye Šervāni* ("A Collection of Poems"), by Ziyā' ad-Din Sajjādi (ed.), 11th ed., Entešārāt-e Zavvār, Tehrān 2014–2015, pp. 23–28. The allusion to St. Mary's thread refers to the apocryphal story, in which Mary was believed to spin the thinnest thread, which should have been bent in two to be used for weaving.

²³ It is an allusion to the Sufi legend about the needle Jesus took with him to the other world. Annemarie Schimmel comments on the consequences of that act: "This apparently innocent act proved that he had not yet attained absolute poverty and perfect trust in God so that he was placed only in the fourth heaven, not in the immediate Divine presence." Annemarie Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalāloddin Rumi*, Persian Studies Series, no. 8, Suny Press, New York 1993, p. 150.

saffron-yellow face. He sits on his shackles like a hen on her eggs and cries bloody tears, which he substitutes for his meals and wine. His only visitor is a cloud which he can only partly see from a narrow skylight and at night he is embraced by grief and sorrow.

This poetics of pain, horror and disgust juxtaposes the idyllic accounts of a royal feast, dominant in classical court poetry and offers a counter-narrative to the dominant literary discourse. As Theodor Adorno claims in his *Negative Dialectics* “[t]he need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth”,²⁴ so the Ahrimanic, infernal aesthetics complements the conventional Ahuraic, paradisiacal representations of joy, happiness and delight.

Yet, it should be stressed that, though composed in prison, *habsiyye* belongs to court poetry, and like carnivalesque performances, it is developed within a rhetorical system that counterbalances symbolically. Thus, though the carceral discourse resorts to a sort of counter-aesthetic, yet it is by no means anti-aesthetic. As a literary genre, *habsiyye* is, in fact, an aestheticization of the prison experience like *xamriyye* is an aestheticization of drinking wine. The finest examples of rhetorical embellishment of carceral diction come from the western peripheries of Iranian world and the *Divān* of the Transcaucasian poet-prisoner, Xāqāni Šervāni. As Arthur John Arberry remarks, Xāqāni’s “doleful verses are crowded with brilliant ornament and far-fetched conceits”²⁵ which can be demonstrated in the following passage:

صباحدم چون کله بندد آه دود آسای من	چون شفق در خون نشیند چشم شب پیمای من
مجلس غم ساخته است و من چو بید سوخته	تا به من راق کند مژگان می پالای من
رنگ و بازیچه است کار گنبد نارنج رنگ	چند کوشم کز بروتم نگذرد صفرای من
تیر باران سحر دارم سپر چون نفکند	این کهن گرگ خشن بارانی از غوغای من
این خماهن گون که چون ریم آهنم پالود و سوخت	شد سکاھن پوشش از دود دل دروای من

When at dawn my smoke-like sigh billows up as a canopy,
 my night-measuring eyes sit bathed in blood like sunrise.
 The party of grief is prepared, myself a burning willow-twig,
 So that my wine-straining eyelids may thus act as filter.
 The orange-hued dome of heaven is a very kaleidoscope:
 How long must I boil,²⁶ for my yellow bile all to flow out?
 My morning sighs rain like arrows; why doesn't that old wolf

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, E.B. Ashton (trans.), Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London 1973, p. 17.

²⁵ Arberry, *Classical Persian Literature*, p. 121.

²⁶ *Divān-e Xāqāni*, pp. 320–321. In Arberry's version of the poem: 'must I boil' (جوشم) instead of 'must I strive' (کوشم).

in shepherd's clothing throw down his shield before my clamour?
 Since this iron-grey vat has scoured and fired my iron-dross
 it is wrapped in smokeblack expressed from my bewildered heart.²⁷

Xāqāni's description of the 'gloomy carceral feast', which is held at dawn, contrasts implicitly with the joyful courtly custom of *sabuh*, namely feasting and drinking wine in the morning.

As we may notice in the above example, the negative dialectics of prison poems sometimes adopt irony (*tanz*), usually a bitter version, sarcastic tones and mockery (*hajv*, *fokāhe*), which are mainly aimed at fate, prison wardens and the poet's enemies. The satirical effect is created mainly by combining low subjects with high diction, the courtly and idyllic poetics with the antithetic carceral reality. For instance, Mas'ud Sa'd boasts of his high position in the mountain fortress which resembles that of mighty kings (*moluk*) who reach the sky, touch Venus (the morning or evening star, *Zohre*), and set foot on the moon.²⁸ In another *qaside*, the poet confesses that suffering (*mehnat*) is like a faithful lover who embraces him tightly every night.²⁹ In more contemporary *habsiyyāt* written by Maleko-š-šo'arā Bahār, the poet's object of contemplation or admiration (*manzar*) is the wall (*divār*). His comrades (*munes*) are mice (*muš*), and his boon companions (*nadim*) are fleas (*keyk*); his continuous sighing (*āh-e peyāpey*) serves him as a fan (*bād-zan*), and the fire in his soul (*suz-e jān*) is his candle (*šam*).³⁰ When night comes, a 'carceral feast' begins, the mosquitoes (*paše*) play on hornpipes (*sornā*), while the poet plays the harp (*čang-zan*) – i.e. scratches himself (*čang-zan*)³¹—and bugs and lice dance while he groans (*afqān*):

²⁷ Transl. by Arberry. The translator refers to the commentators of Xāqāni's verses and explains: "the 'old wolf in shepherd's clothing' is the nine-layered heaven, the controller of human destinies; the 'iron-grey vat' is Khāqāni's cell. As for 'myself a burning willow-twig,' it is pointed out that burnt willow was employed in the process of clarifying wine". See: Arberry, *Classical Persian Literature*, p. 121.

²⁸ *Divān-e Sa'd Salmān*, p. 552. Cf. a typical blessing (*do'ā*) addressed to the king in the panegyric *qaside* (e.g. Rudaki's *Mādar-e mey*).

²⁹ *Divān-e Sa'd-e Salmān*, p. 386.

³⁰ Maleko-š-šo'arā [Mohammad Taqī] Bahār, *Divān-e aš'ar* ("A Collection of Poems"), Mo'assese-ye Entesārāt-e Negāh, Tehrān 2008–2009, p. 387.

³¹ A paronomasia based on the double meaning of the noun *čang* – 1. 'a claw'; 2. 'a harp', and the verb *zadan* – 1. 'to hit', 2. 'to play an instrument'. More on satirical tones in Bahār's poetry, including *habsiyyāt*, see: Hešmat Mo'ayyed, *Hazl-o tanz-o šuxi dar še'r-e Bahār* ("Parody, Irony and Humour in Bahār's poetry"), "Kārnāmag", 2:1, spring 2017, viewed on 31 March 2017, <<https://www.irannamag.com/article/%D9%87%D8%B2%D9%84-%D9%88-%D8%B7%D9%86%D8%B2-%D9%88-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AE%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%B1/>>

Note: *Hazl* (usually meaning 'the obscene') is translated here after the definition of Al-Taftazani (14th century) as "something employed in a sense contrary to convention". See: Sinan Antoon, *The Poetics of the Obscene in Pre-modern Arabic Poetry: Ibn al-Ḥajjāj and Sukhf*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2014, p. 18.

چون شب شود پشه سرنا زن شود من چنگ زن
 کار ساس و کیک رقص و کار من افغان بود

When the night comes, the mosquitoes start playing hornpipes, and I play
 the harp
 Bugs and fleas begin to dance and I begin to groan.³²

Though the imprisoned poets claim to be innocent, they usually refrain from blaming the whimsical ruler for their incarceration. Instead, they prefer to present themselves as victims of fate (*ruzegār*, *zamāne*, *čarx*, *sepehr*, *haft-gardun*, *falak*, *qazā*), that old wolf in sheep's or shepherd's clothing (*kohan gorg-e xašen-bārāni*), which is blind-hearted (*kurdel*), more crooked than the course of the Christian script (*kažvar-tar ze xatt-e Tarsā*),³³ who acts awkwardly and clumsily like a bungler (*bi-honar*), toying with them in a mocking way (*ma' rake*), attacking the caravan of their life like a robber (*dozdvār*), grinding them like a mill (*āsyā*) or pounding their brain, though they are not an anvil (*sendān*). In one of his poems Mas'ud Sa'd addresses heaven (*sepehr*):

چندین چه زنی تو؟! من نه سندانم	بر مغز من، ای سپهر، هر ساعت
در تف چه بری دلم؟! نه بیکانم	در خون چه کشتی تنم؟! نه زوپنم
پویه چه کنی؟! که تنگ میدانم	حمله چه دهی؟! که کند شمشیرم

How long, heaven, will you continue every hour
 Hammering on my brain? Why, I am not an anvil!
 Why do you bathe my body in blood? I am not a spear;
 Why do you scrape away at my heart? I am not an arrow.
 Why do you charge against me? My sword is blunt enough;
 Why do you gallop at me? My arena is very narrow...³⁴

The severest torment, however (for at least some of imprisoned poets), is separation (*hejrān*) from the ruler and the inability to see his face. Following the patterns of amorous verses, the imprisoned poet assumes the role of a lover (*'āseq*) addressing his patron as beloved (*ma' šuq*). Hence, while incarcerated, he does not simply seek freedom but, in fact, he yearns for the presence of the ruler as if he were his sweetheart. Thus, for example, Falaki Šervāni laments to his addressee who condemned him to prison:

³² Bahār, *Divān-e aš'ār*, p. 387.

³³ Translation by Vladimir Minorsky, see: Vladimir Minorsky, *Khāqāni and Andronicus Comnenus*, "Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies", University of London, 11:3 (1945), p. 567.

³⁴ *Divān-e Sa'd-e Salmān*, pp. 430–431. Transl. by Arberry, see: Arberry, *Classical Persian Literature*, p. 82.

که برت گاه بار، بار نیست	کشتتم را بس اینقدر باری
که از این بیش قرارم نیست	بیشتر زین مدارم از خود دور
دانه ی لعل در کنارم نیست	نیست شب کز سرشک خونینم
جز دعا گفتن تو کارم نیست	از پی حَزَز جان خود در بند
ور نه باک از چنین هزارم نیست	رنجم آنست که از تو مهجورم

In order to kill me, you can just deprive me of the opportunity of seeing you on the day of audience (*bār*).

Don't keep me any more far from you, because I cannot stand more than this.

There is no night that there would be no rubies around me which come from my bloody tears.

Though the yoke (*haraz*) on my captive soul (*jān dar band*)

I do not stop blessing you.

My pain is that I am separated (*mahjur*) from you,

otherwise, I do not fear bearing thousands of shackles like that.³⁵

By assimilating elegiac and love diction, classical *habsiyye* proves to be a receptive genre which exists on the intersection of a series of other forms and blends distinct literary styles. As an expression of personal experience, it is also a form of self-narrative, autobiography, akin to a medieval variety called *hasb-e hāl*. 'Autobiographical' motifs in classical Persian poetry usually form part of panegyric, whereby the poet wishes to improve his pitiful condition (which he does not deserve) and regain his patron's favour.

Hence, instead of introspective observations and highlighting various aspects of his life, the poet indulges in both self-praise (*faxr/mofāxere/xod-setāyi*) and self-lamentation (*šakvā*). These two complimentary modes, complaining (about being underestimated) and boasting (of one's superior virtues), form the essential core of Persian literary self-presentations and the natural impulse of autobiographical writings. Julie Scott Meisami equates, therefore, classical Persian self-narration with a 'complaint poem' and notices that captivity poems are distinguished from the *hasb-e hāl* only by the fact that they are written from prison.³⁶

Furthermore, in present times, the prison experience has not ceased to be a literary theme and autobiographical diction is arguably a prevailing mode of prison-writing. Yet, with the end of the institution of court poetry and the growing influence of Western literary models, carceral narratives have lost their pragmatic *telos* as petitions aimed at

³⁵ *Divān-e hakim-e Najmoddin-e Mohammad-e Falaki-ye Šervāni*, M. Tāheri Šahāb (ed.), *Ketābxāne-ye Entesārāt-e Ebn-e Sinā*, Tehrān 1966–1967, p. 24. Cf. Akimushkina, *Zhanr habsijjat*, p. 61.

³⁶ Julie Scott Meisami, *Panegyric and Related Types of Poetry*, in: *General Introduction to Persian Literature: History of Persian Literature*, vol. 1, J.T.P. de Bruijn (ed.), I.B. Tauris, London, New York 2009 (Kindle edition).

winning freedom for their author. Nonetheless, modern poets still compose their own *habsiyye*, in both classical and modern verse, either Nimaic (*še'r-e Nimāyi*) or free (*še'r-e āzād*).³⁷ The bulk of contemporary literature on captivity, however, is written in prose, from outside prison cells and, hence, retrospectively. Such literary practices, which can be called *zendān-negāri* or *zendān-nevisi* (prison-writing) are mostly of a documentary and testimonial character and are chiefly represented by personal narratives and memoirs (*xāterāt-e zendān*).³⁸ Apart from various genres of *zendān-negāri*, the status of which is assumed to be 'non-fictional', a less extensive, though significant portion of contemporary prison literature (*adabiyyāt-e zendān*) features fictional stories and novels with carceral themes, which are written mostly by prominent Persian writers.³⁹ Needless to say, the post-revolutionary carceral narratives are published mainly in illegal publications, abroad or on the internet.

The dynamics of the Persian 'carceral mode', which can be traced through nearly one millennium, may raise taxonomic controversies concerning the generic capacity of the classical term of *habsiyyāt* and its extension to modern literary practices, ranging from the factual discourse of *zendān-negāri* to the broadest term of *adabiyyāt-e zendān*, which includes fictional narratives with prison themes. Whereas the heterogenous descriptive-narrative character of the classical *habsiyye* mainly serves its goal as a lamentation or

³⁷ 'Nimaic verse' (*še'r-e Nimāyi*), 'free verse' (*še'r-e āzād*) or 'modern poetry' (*še're nou*) – a type of free verse introduced to Persian poetry by the poet Nimā Yušij (1895–1960). His poems do not apply to the strict normative rules of the classical poetry in terms of regularity of rhyme and the length of verses. Such modern poems of captivity with lyrical themes were composed, for instance, by Mehdi Axvān-e Sāles (1928–1990), who has also written classical prison *qasides* (*Man in pā'iz dar zendān*) and *qazals* (*Qazal-e 6*). See: Mehdi Axvān-e Sāles 1995–1996: 40–43, 17–21. Mehdi Axvān-e Sāles, *Dar hayāt-e kučak-e pāyiz, dar zendān* ("In Autumn's little yard, in prison"), in: *Se ketāb* ("Three books"), Entešārāt-e Zemestān, Tehrān 1995–1996, pp. 17–21, 40–43.

³⁸ One of the first representatives of modern *zendān-negāri* is Bozorg Alavi (1904–1997), an Iranian leftist writer, influential novelist and founding member of the communist Tudeh Party, who wrote his accounts of life in prison during Rezā-šāh's reign: *Varaq-pāre-hā-ye zendān* ("Scrap-papers from prison") published in Tehrān in 1941 and *Panjāh-o se nafar* ("The fifty three people") published in Tehrān in 1942. More recently, after the Iranian Revolution of 1978–1979, their memoirs have written: Šahrnuš Pārsipur, *Xāterāt-e zendān* ("Prison memoirs"), Baran, Stockholm 1996; Parvāne Alizāde, *Xub negāh konid, rāstegi ast (gozāreš-e zendān)* ("Look carefully, that is true. An account of prison"), 3rd ed., Editions Khavaran, Paris 1997; Nušābe Amiri, *Az ešq va az omid* ("About love and hope"), Editions Khavaran, Paris 2003, Monire Barādarān [M. Raha], *Haqiqat-e sāde* ("Simple Truth"), Hannover 1997, Viewed 20 August 2017, https://www.iranrights.org/attachments/library/doc_1.pdf; Faribā Sābet, *Yād-hā-ye zendān* ("Prison memoirs"), Editions Khavaran, Paris 2004; *et al.* See also: Renata Rusek-Kowalska, *Sibā-Zeynab-Zibā: the metamorphoses of an Iranian woman*, in: *Studies on the Iranian World: Medieval and Modern*, Anna Krasnowolska, Renata Rusek-Kowalska (eds), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2015, p. 82.

³⁹ Among the writers of short stories and novels featuring the post-revolutionary prison themes one can mention: Hušang Golširi, *Šāh-e siyāhpūšan* ("The King of the Benighted"), s. I. 1987–1988, viewed 20 January 2018, <http://www.iranpdf.com/literature/shah-black-coating.html>; Ahmad Qolāmi, *Jirjirak* (A Cricket), Našr-e Češme, Tehrān 2011–2012; Hoseyn Sanāpur, *Vīrān miyāyi* ("You are coming ruined"), Našr-e Češme, Tehrān 2001–2002; Mahmud Doulatābādi, *Zavāl-e kolonel* ("The fall of the colonel"), Našr-e Gardun, Germany (s.l.) 2013; *et al.* See also: Renata Rusek-Kowalska, *Reading a medieval romance in post-revolutionary Tehran: Hushang Golshiri's novella King of the Benighted*, "Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis", 11:1 (2016), pp. 41–52.

a petition for release, the retrospective narrative of contemporary prison memoirs and autobiographical writings (particularly those written by non-literati), apart from their testimonial dimension, may resemble a sort of *trauma-and-redemption* story scheme.⁴⁰ This narrative model is followed, for example, by Zibā Nāvak, once a communist revolutionary girl, who repented in prison and became a fanatical supporter of Xomeyni, and, years after her release, wrote her memoirs, changing her personality once again, to a liberated blogger. In her three-volume memoirs, she describes her radical transformations resorting to the metaphor of a spring mechanism (*fanar*) stretched to its extremes or a process wherein a chrysalis turns into a butterfly. In such a retrospective affirmation of traumatic experience, (re)interpreted in terms of trial (*emtehān*) or a series of tribulations (*haft-xān*), which entail a transformation, carceral self-narratives tend to iterate the pattern of epic hero in the quest for his own identity. Hence, Zibā's story, as in the tale of Bižan or the afflictions of the vine's baby, can be read within the framework of the 'heroic monomyth',⁴¹ with a motif of Separation, the Adventures in the 'other world' of prison,⁴² and finally, a Release and a Return (as a mature hero).

The narrative potential of carceral experience, therefore, stems from its *implicit*, conscious or unconscious, mythological conceptualization. Infernal or underworld imagery of the classical *habsiyye*, as well as the epic arc of captive tales and modern carceral autobiographies, testify that behind the phenomenon of classical and modern prison narratives lies a deeply ingrained mythological substratum. Hence, a carceral narrative can be read as a secular, personalized version of the tale of descending 'into the dark' and the agrarian myth of a dying and rising god.⁴³ It is, after all, a tale of suffering and transformation, which constitutes the core of every narrative with a happy ending.

⁴⁰ Zibā Nāvak, *Sibā. Dourān-e kudaki, nou-javāni va qabl az zendān* ("Sibā. The time of childhood, youth and before prison"), Germany (s. l.) 2007, viewed 10 October 2012, <ganjoor.net/attar/elahiname/ebkhsh21/sh3/>; Nāvak, *Sibā-Zeynab. Dourān-e zendān* ("Sibā-Zeynab. Prison"), Germany (s. l.) 2007, viewed 10 October 2012, <http://Zibā_nawak.files.wordpress.com/2009/10/zendan1.pdf>; Nāvak, *Zeynab. Dourān-e ba'd az zendān* ("Zeynab. After prison"), Germany (s. l.) 2009, viewed 10 October 2012, http://Zibā_nawak.files.wordpress.com/2009/10/zinab.pdf; Rusek-Kowalska, *Sibā-Zeynab-Zibā*.

⁴¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed., New World Library, California 2008 (first published 1949); Joseph Campbell, Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, Doubleday, New York 1988; David A. Leeming (ed.), *Heroic Monomyth*, in: *The Oxford Companion to World Mythology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009, p. 179.

⁴² Carceral trials which correspond to the epic the stage of Adventure in the 'unknown world' may consist of: Interrogations, Tortures, Boycott, Solitary Confinement etc.

⁴³ The Iranian traces of this myth can be found in the figure of Jamšid, the Avestan Yima Xšaēta. On the "poetic projection of one of the central agricultural myths" in the *qaside* "The Mother of wine", see: Marina Reisner, *The Life of the Text and the Fate of Tradition. III: Interpretation of Pre-Islamic Calendar Festivals in Classical Persian Poetry of the 10th–12th Centuries (by the Example of Nawruz)*, "Manuscripta Orientalia", 10:2 (June 2004), p. 35. pp. 34–42; more on the mythological background in classical *habsiyyāt*, see: Akimushkina, *Zhanr habsijjat*.

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