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## Metamorphic Narratives: A Comparative Study of Transformation in Gholam Hossein Saedi's *The Cow* and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

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**Abstract:** This study employs the framework of Influence Studies within Comparative Literature to explore the impact of Franz Kafka (1883-1924) on Gholam Hossein Saedi (1936-1985). The primary focus of this comparative study is to assess the quality of influence and elucidation regarding the overarching perspective on loneliness, isolation, identity crisis, and metamorphosis, ultimately aiming to comprehend the similarities and distinctions between Gholam Hossein Saedi's *The Cow* (1965) and Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915). The present research, conducted through a descriptive-analytical approach and grounded in the French school of comparative literature, concerned with influence studies, determines that the central theme of Kafka's novel revolves around human destiny, which is altered by societal issues. Both narratives illustrate the transformation of their main characters into non-human forms, emphasizing the alienation and isolation faced by individuals in contemporary society. Kafka examines the absurdity of human existence through Gregor's transformation and his subsequent ostracism by society, while Saedi sheds light on the struggles of marginalized communities through Mashd Hassan's change into a cow. The findings of this study demonstrate that Saedi, influenced by Kafka, has adapted and expanded the notion of metamorphosis in *The Cow*, thereby enriching the landscape of Persian literature.

**Keywords:** Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Gholam Hossein Saedi's *The Cow*, Comparative Literature.

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## **1. Introduction**

In his works, Franz Kafka (1883-1924) often deals with themes of alienation, isolation, existence, and the struggle for identity in a world that seems indifferent to human suffering (*Anatomist of Power* 6, 21, 112, 126, and 128). His characters are often trapped in bureaucratic systems or face insurmountable obstacles that they cannot overcome. This sense of helplessness and despair has resonated with readers across generations and cultures. "Kafka's readers and critics, and even his own writing," Duttlinger claims, "confront the overwhelming forces of modern alienation ..." (273).

Kafka's works often explore themes of alienation, isolation, existence, and the search for identity in a world that seems apathetic to human suffering. His characters are usually trapped within bureaucratic systems or face obstacles that seem impossible to overcome. This enduring sense of helplessness and despair resonates with audiences across different generations and cultures. Duttlinger observes that "Kafka's readers and critics, and even his own writing confront the overwhelming forces of modern alienation ..." (273).

Kafka's literary style is characterized by a profound utilization of symbolism, metaphor, and allegory. His works often embody multiple layers of meaning, which facilitates a range of interpretations among different readers. This intrinsic ambiguity has played a significant role in the enduring allure of his writings, prompting a multitude of literary analyses and interpretations. The characters and components within his stories are frequently regarded as a "pure expression of the psyche, clothing of the inner, nothing but symbol" (Winkel Holm 38).

Gholam Hossein Saedi (1936-1985) was born into a middle-class family in Tabriz. At the age of six, during World War II, Tabriz experienced bombings from Soviet aircraft, which led his family to move to the countryside to stay with relatives whose homes were unaffected. This period of living among impoverished villagers greatly enhanced Saedi's awareness of the social and political issues of his time. As a result, many of his most significant stories and theatrical pieces, along with his most memorable characters, were inspired by these early experiences with rural life (Milani 2008: 879). Saedi adeptly blends psychedelic Realism with a deep literary commitment, creating works that challenge, merge, or redefine traditional genres to tackle the social injustices, economic disparities, political struggles, and existential concerns faced by his peers.

Following the abdication of Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1941, Iran entered a period characterized by relative liberalism. However, this environment underwent a significant transformation following Mohammad Reza Shah's coup d'état against Mohammad

Mosadeq in 1953, which resulted in the reinstatement of strict censorship measures. The formation of SAVAK, the National Intelligence and Security Organization, in 1956 further exacerbated these limitations. Despite the young Shah's aspirations to modernize Iran socially and economically, he enforced harsh restrictions on political freedoms, particularly impacting writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals. In reaction to this repressive atmosphere, Iranian authors turned to "committed literature" as a vehicle to honor resistance against the Shah's regime and to portray Western imperialism as a unifying force of otherness (*Imagining Iran* 133-134).

Shariati contends that despite the widespread use of censorship to stifle opposition to the state, writers such as Saedi remained committed to their artistic endeavors in resistance to the prevailing oppressive ideology. Through the use of irony, Saedi depicts a society that resonates with his audience, where friends take on the role of captors, family members collaborate with the authorities, social gatherings devolve into sessions of interrogation, and judges function as police interrogators and torturers. It is crucial to emphasize that, notwithstanding the specific context, Saedi effectively communicates a universal message by critiquing societies that seek to suppress individuals or shamelessly sacrifice those in the quest for truth in order to maintain the values and integrity of the dominant order (59-60).

Saedi's literary works often explore themes of social injustice, political oppression, and the pursuit of freedom and human rights. His writing is characterized by vivid imagery, powerful symbolism, and complex character development. Shariati notes that Saedi's main characters are frequently portrayed as rebels striving for the unattainable, driven by their idealistic beliefs. These characters prioritize their freedom and strive to overcome challenges while preserving their unique identities. Saedi argues that the most profound tragedy for humanity arises when individuals face their own limitations while also being hindered by societal constraints (*Staging Iranian Modernity* 19).

To establish a connection between Saedi and Kafka, it is crucial to delve into the realm of Comparative Literature, which emphasizes the study of literary interactions and relationships across various cultures and languages. A significant aspect of Comparative Literature is the examination of literary influence, which explores how authors have impacted each other's works. This investigation aims to analyze the effect of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* on Saedi's *The Cow* through a comparative analysis of the writings of an Iranian author and a European writer. The goal is to demonstrate how Saedi's social and historical context provided a backdrop for Kafka's influence, as well as how he has

incorporated this literary style into Persian dramatic literature. A comparative examination of the transformations depicted in Saedi's *The Cow* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* offers significant insights into the cultural and social perspectives presented in each work. Both authors delve into themes of identity, alienation, and metamorphosis within their narratives.

## **2. Review of the Literature**

A considerable amount of research has been undertaken regarding the life and contributions of Gholam Hossein Saedi, encompassing his diverse body of work, which includes stories, short stories, novels, plays, screenplays, and essays. Each investigation has offered a unique perspective on the introduction of this prolific author and the examination of his themes and subjects. Nevertheless, there has been no comparative analysis of the theme of metamorphosis as presented in Kafka's work of the same name alongside Saedi's *The Cow*, nor has there been an exploration of Kafka's influence on Saedi.

In "*The Cow, The Metamorphosis: A Comparison of Character Processing in Saedi's The Cow and Kafka's The Metamorphosis*," Nasr Isfahani and Ja'fari examine and compare the factors influencing character development in *The Cow* and *The Metamorphosis*. They note that these two works present an expressionist depiction of the society of Saedi and Kafka's time, aiming to portray, through a magical realism approach, the fear, oppression, and dictatorship dominating Iran after the coup of August 19, 1953, and Prague in the early 1900s. The authors believe that dialogue, compared to other character development techniques, is used very minimally in *The Metamorphosis*, while description, with its wide range of applications, forms the dominant logic behind the character development style in the work.

In "*Sociological Criticism of The Cow by Gholam Hossein Saedi*," Tayefi and Azimi assert that artists are not solitary figures in the process of creating their works. The artistic endeavor is profoundly influenced by the political, social, philosophical, and religious beliefs held by the artist. Therefore, a comprehensive critique of a work requires an exploration of the creator's worldview, which is shaped by their social class and level of awareness. This critique ultimately mirrors a distinct historical era, cultural backdrop, social conditions, and the dominant worldview of that particular society. The authors adopt an inductive approach that integrates both description and analysis, considering the political and social contexts of the author's era. They examine the sociological aspects of *The Cow* through the theoretical lenses of György Lukács and Lucien Goldman to clarify its importance within Saedi's perspective and worldview.

In "The Reflection of Absurdism in the Works of Gholam Hossein Saedi," Saadatynia and Fuladi Sepehr contend that Saedi skillfully encapsulates the societal atmosphere and the traits of Persian literature during the 1960s. His literary output reveals the widespread sense of meaninglessness that characterizes contemporary narratives. This study explores the Absurdist themes that are woven throughout Saedi's body of work. Various facets of Absurdism are apparent in his writings, with varying levels of emphasis across his different collections. Almost all of his works grapple with themes such as existential concerns, complex dilemmas, psychological conflicts, despair, and contemplations on mortality.

In "Analysis of Gholam Hossein Saedi's Plays Influenced by Traditional and Modern European Plays," Ghannadan and his associates contend that Saedi seeks to depict the social and personal dilemmas of his time. Utilizing his expertise in psychiatry and adopting humanistic and psychoanalytic viewpoints, he meticulously explores these challenges. The researchers emphasize the fundamental aspects of Saedi's works, as well as the impact of his plays and screenplays on Iranian theater, underscoring his integration of both traditional and modern European theatrical forms. They observe that Saedi's creations express the difficulties encountered by individuals, encompassing economic struggles, poverty, social decline, psychological distress, identity crises, misguided beliefs, dehumanization, alienation, suicide, anxieties, and fears. Additionally, they discuss the resistance to governmental and military oppression, the struggle of the marginalized against oppressive regimes, and the violence perpetrated by authorities against those advocating for freedom and constitutional rights. In summary, the political, social, economic, cultural, and surreal themes present in Saedi's broader body of work are also mirrored in his plays. By incorporating theatrical techniques from European playwrights such as Ionesco, O'Neill, Beckett, Pinter, Genet, and Albee, the researchers assert that Saedi has profoundly enriched and advanced the realm of Iranian theater and playwriting.

In "The Comparative Study of Kafka's Novel 'Metamorphosis' and Sultan Al-Amimi's 'Samsa,'" Bakhshi maintains that the central theme of Kafka's novel revolves around human destiny, which is both isolated and altered by societal issues. Al-Amimi, while drawing inspiration from Kafka's narrative, has modified the theme and the protagonist's fate, envisioning an alternative future for him. The character remains consistent in both stories. In Kafka's version, the transformation manifests as an animal, whereas in Al-Amimi's rendition, it occurs in a human form. Kafka adopts a pessimistic and isolating perspective of the character, creating a sense of distance from others, while Sultan al-

Amimi presents a more optimistic interpretation, portraying the character as a socially engaged and content individual.

In "Analysis and Characterization of Gholamhossein Saedi's *The Cow*," Hosseinabadi highlights that Saedi introduces a protagonist who reflects both physical and spiritual impairments, mirroring the existing social conditions, societal issues, and turmoil. Dialogue emerges as a vital component of this narrative, with the narrator aligning himself with the protagonists, actively engaging in listening and conversation. The dialogue within *The Cow* is built upon a solid framework, allowing the complex nature of the characters to be vividly portrayed to the reader. The fundamental essence of *The Cow* is rooted in conversation. The protagonist and the narrative's intentions are revealed to the audience through the dynamic interaction between fictional characters and the narrator in dialogue. Saedi's incorporation of magical realism in *The Cow* is particularly noteworthy, as he primarily integrates elements related to meaning and theme, while also favoring surrealistic and expressionistic depictions.

### **3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This research is grounded in the theoretical framework of Comparative Literature, which has historically aimed to investigate the interconnections and literary influences across the literatures of various nations and cultures. Neither the French nor the American schools of Comparative Literature have defined their objectives merely as comparing literary texts. Rather, their emphasis lies in uncovering and examining the relationships that exist between these texts. As Bassnett maintains, comparative literary study "involves the study of texts across cultures, that it is interdisciplinary, and that it is concerned with patterns of connection in literatures across both time and space" (1).

In order to achieve intercultural competency and awareness, this comparative study aligns itself with the French school of comparative analysis. Philarète Chasles defines it as the study of "the influence of thought upon thought" (qtd. in Bassnett 12). This school employs positivistic approaches to examine the history of international literary interactions, incorporating doxology, mesologie, and crenologie, all grounded in studies of homogeneity. Doxology investigates the trajectory and impact of a literary phenomenon on foreign literature. Mesologie focuses on the roles of intermediaries and transmitters, including translators, reviewers, critics, scholars, travelers, and various media such as books and journals. Crenologie views writers as recipients and subsequently traces the origins of the influences they encounter.

Comparative Literature often explores the concept of literary influence, which investigates how one author may impact the writing of another. Researchers focusing on literary influence analyze how various elements can shape a writer's themes, viewpoints, ideas, and stylistic choices. The perceived influences can differ in intensity, ranging from strong to weak, and may be direct or indirect, as well as conscious or unconscious. Studies of influence are classified based on these distinctions. S.S. Prawer has identified four primary categories of influence studies: the analysis of direct borrowing, the investigation of the convergence of literary influences, the study of literatures in contact, and the exploration of the influence of ideas.

The investigation into the impact of one author's work on another has consistently occupied a prominent role in the realm of literary studies. The examination of 'influence' concerning the originality of the source or the impact of the author on their work has gradually transitioned to 'reception' studies, which emphasize reactions, opinions, orientations, critiques, and similar aspects. This shift has moved the focus from the author to the reader. Rather than concentrating on the creator, the attention is now directed towards the audience. Reception studies assess how readers respond to a writer's work. The investigation of influence should be analytical, involving a thorough, detailed, and precise approach. Influence studies assume a direct causal relationship between the creator and the audience.

The effective and thoughtful integration of originality with influences from various sources leads to creative innovation. Consequently, examining the impact of influences on an author, their work, or literature as a whole facilitates a deeper comprehension of the completed piece. Nevertheless, the primary focus should be on how the influenced author interprets and utilizes these borrowed elements, as well as the resultant impact on the final literary creation.

#### **4. Analytical Perspective**

##### **4.1. The Literary Value of the Concept of Metamorphosis**

A multitude of literary works from various cultures and historical epochs have thoroughly examined the notion of metamorphosis. This concept holds considerable importance in literature primarily due to its capacity to engage with the theme of identity. Within literary frameworks, metamorphosis often functions as a compelling metaphor for personal development and self-discovery. It frequently serves as a catalyst for individual change. Characters who undergo metamorphosis typically experience significant transformations, discarding their former identities in favor of new ones. Through these

transformative experiences, authors delve into themes of identity, adaptability, and the search for meaning. Metamorphosis enables writers to explore the complex nature of humanity, investigating different aspects of human behavior, aspirations, fears, and vulnerabilities through the depiction of characters who undergo substantial changes. These characters may experience psychological or physical transformations that force them to confront their true selves. Through such metamorphoses, authors examine the complexities of the human experience, illuminating universal emotions and circumstances. Literature utilizes the concept of transformation to challenge societal norms, stimulate introspection, and deepen readers' understanding of themselves and their environments through the evolution of characters or objects.

#### **4.2. Historical Context and Initial Reception of Kafka in Iran**

During the Qajar period, the introduction of Western culture to Iran was significantly advanced through the dispatch of Iranian students to study abroad, the establishment of foreign educational institutions, and the translation of various texts. This era marked the beginning of widespread translation of Western literature. From 1921 to 1941, the majority of translations were derived from French, executed by translators such as Mohammad-Ali Jamāl-zādeh (1892-1997), Šādiq Hidāyat (1903-1951), Mohammad Ghazi (1913-1998), and Ahmad Shamlou (1925-2000), all of whom possessed proficiency in the language. The years between 1941 and 1953 saw Iranian fiction being shaped by the translations of works from notable authors including Maxim Gorky, Anatole France, Emile Zola, Romain Rolland, Franz Kafka, Shakespeare, André Gide, Maurice Maeterlinck, Victor Hugo, and Sartre (MirAbedini 201). Hidāyat was responsible for the first Persian translations of works by Kafka and Sartre. In the period from 1954 to 1963, there were 666 foreign stories translated into Persian, in contrast to 372 original Iranian narratives.

This trend illustrates a continuous expansion of translations from Western languages, which have played a crucial role in exposing Iranian writers to the art of storytelling, various literary movements, and contemporary trends in Western fiction. Notable movements such as Surrealism, Existentialism, Absurdism, and Nihilism were introduced to Iran through the translations of authors like Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Ionesco, and Dostoevsky, capturing the interest of Iranian writers. The ability of writers from this era to engage with foreign languages, along with the international travels of figures such as Hidāyat, Šādiq Chubak (1916-1998), and Saedi, provided them with further opportunities to absorb and be influenced by the dominant currents in Western literature.



During the mid-20th century, Iranian intellectuals began to engage with Kafka's works, leading to a notable rise in their recognition within the country. As the Iranian literary community grappled with numerous societal and political changes, existentialist and absurdist literature gained prominence. Kafka's exploration of themes such as alienation, bureaucracy, and identity crises resonated deeply with Iran's sociopolitical environment, making his works both pertinent and impactful for Iranian readers.

Saadatinia and the co-authors assert that one of the primary factors contributing to the embrace of absurdist thought in Iran was the prevailing political climate. The nation has historically endured invasions by foreign powers, colonial rule, chaos, insecurity, and a series of political, social, and economic crises. Over the last century, these challenges have manifested in various forms. Notable events during this period include the Constitutional Movement, its subsequent suppression, and the ascension of Reza Khan following the 1921 coup. This rise signified the onset of an era characterized by absolute despotism and oppression, where any aspirations for idealism and freedom were systematically stifled. Writers and intellectuals found themselves in an environment steeped in oppression, fear, pessimism, and despair (185).

The political climate of these years evidently influenced literature broadly, and fiction writing specifically (Roozbeh 111). Iranian literature during this time experienced a significant crisis. Themes such as death, escapism through hedonism, and romantic nihilism emerged as defining characteristics of the literature from this era. Authors sought to diminish the value of life by juxtaposing it with death, while simultaneously attempting to evade the confrontation with the terror of mortality through the trivialities of everyday existence (Mirabedini 369). From 1921 to 1961, contemporary Iranian fiction, shaped by the societal political atmosphere, became a medium for articulating feelings of hopelessness, failure, disillusionment, confusion, loss of values, loss of identity, madness, and ultimately, death.

In Iran, Kafka's writings have found a receptive audience despite the prevailing cultural and political divides. His distinctive style, thematic richness, and deep exploration of the human condition have captivated readers across various nations, including Iran. Although Kafka wrote primarily in German and Persian translations did not appear until the latter half of the 20th century, his influence on Iranian literature and culture has been significant. This analysis explores the significance of Kafka's reception in the Iranian context.

Kafka's narratives, while they encapsulate themes of futility, absurdity, suffering, and anxiety, are not entirely devoid of hope. The protagonists in these tales, despite their awareness that their endeavors are likely to culminate in failure, persist in their striving and searching. They continue to fight, clinging to the hope of an intervention from a force that remains absent. Thus, for Kafka, the significance lies in the pursuit and effort itself, rather than in achieving victory.

Iranian authors tend to adopt a pessimistic outlook on society and the surrounding world, rejecting the notion of social progress or upliftment. This viewpoint suggests a withdrawal of divine presence from existence, leaving humanity without any authority to rescue or liberate it from a profound decline. In contrast, Western absurdism does not entirely embody negativity, as its proponents do not share such a bleak perspective. Beneath the seemingly hopeless and dark themes in Kafka's work lies a yearning for a transcendent truth, a deep-seated pain and longing for a higher reality. Conversely, Iranian absurdism lacks any semblance of hope, light, or optimism; it is steeped in darkness, despair, pessimism, and determinism. Life, in all its magnificence, is rendered meaningless. Death signifies the cessation of existence. Helplessness and despair extinguish any hope for liberation, reform, elevation, or progress. The world becomes a dark cul-de-sac from which there is no escape. Motivation and action yield to sheer passivity. Determinism prevails, and individuals, in their utter humiliation and degradation, endure their fate. Any flicker of hope is swallowed by an eternal, dark night (191).

Hidāyat's *Kafka's Message*<sup>1</sup> (1948) is asserted by Khezri to have been pivotal in shaping the reception of Kafka in Iran. It stands as one of the earliest Persian texts to engage critically with a European author and represents the first comprehensive critical examination of Kafka within any Islamic cultural framework. Hidāyat's contributions were vital in familiarizing contemporary Persian literature with Kafka through both translation and critique, particularly in the years following his own era. By drawing attention to the aesthetic and biographical parallels between himself and Kafka, Hidāyat significantly enriched the Iranian literary landscape's engagement with Kafka, distinguishing it from the reception of other Western authors (45).

#### 4.3. Kafka's Influence on Iranian Literature

In the context of integrating Kafka into modern Persian literature through translation and critical analysis, Khezri asserts that Hidāyat's contributions were crucial for the reception

of Kafka in Iran, particularly in the period that followed Hidāyat's lifetime. Following Hidāyat, Khezri points out that Bahrām Šādiqī (1937–85), a modernist fiction writer, was profoundly influenced by Kafka via Hidāyat. His narrative style often echoes Kafka's works, notably in *The Trench and the Empty Canteens*<sup>2</sup> (1970) and the novel *The Heavenly Kingdom*<sup>3</sup> (1961), as well as in several of his other short stories (45). During the mid-20th century, Kafka's writings remained available to Iranian readers through various translations. The contributions of Iranian translators played a crucial role in familiarizing the Persian-speaking community with Kafka's works, and later translations by other notable Iranian translators significantly broadened Kafka's audience.

Kafka's literary works, especially within the contexts of modern and postmodern literature, have significantly influenced Iranian literature. His exploration of themes like absurdity, alienation, bureaucracy, and identity has struck a chord with Iranian authors and thinkers. Numerous writers in Iran have modified their narrative approaches to reflect Kafka's unique style, which is marked by ambiguity and surrealism. By incorporating Kafka's techniques into their own storytelling, these authors have delved into intricate themes concerning alienation, identity, and the interplay of power.

#### 4.3.1. Interpretation and Adaptation

Kafka's intricate and multifaceted narratives have prompted a range of interpretations within Iran. Iranian literary critics and scholars have conducted thorough analyses of Kafka's oeuvre, revealing the various layers of meaning and examining their significance in relation to Iranian society and culture. Additionally, Kafka's stories have been transformed into theatrical productions and film adaptations in Iran, creating fresh opportunities for artistic engagement with his works.

The influence of Franz Kafka on Iranian literature and culture is profound and enduring. His reception in Iran has ignited vigorous intellectual discourse and creative exploration. Iranian audiences have acknowledged the universal nature of Kafka's themes and his capacity to encapsulate the complexities of the human experience. Kafka's writings remain a wellspring of inspiration and reflection for Iranian authors, fostering new pathways for literary and philosophical dialogue.

#### 4.4. Kafka's Influence on Saedi

The influence of Kafka is evident in literary works worldwide, particularly in the writings of the renowned Iranian author Gholam Hossein Saedi, who finds considerable inspiration

in Kafka's body of work. Saedi's examination of themes like absurdity, alienation, and resistance to authoritarian regimes reflects a distinctly Kafkaesque quality. The depth of Kafka's impact on Saedi underscores a literary brilliance that emerges from their intertwined literary landscapes.

#### **4.4.1. Absurdity and Alienation: Shared Themes**

Saedi, akin to Kafka, delves into the themes of absurdity and alienation in his literary works. He depicts characters who suffer under oppressive systems, maneuvering through complex bureaucratic structures while contending with the irrational aspects of their existence. In pieces such as *The Mourners of Bayal*, Saedi adeptly weaves Kafka's motifs into the cultural context of Iran. The transformation of Mashd Hassan in *The Cow* poignantly illustrates the dehumanization, absurdity, and alienation experienced by individuals in backward societies (Isazadeh HajiAgha 140).

#### **4.4.2. The Metamorphosis: A Source of Inspiration**

The impact of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* significantly influenced Saedi's artistic perspective. Inspired by the story of Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis into a giant insect, Saedi explored similar themes of transformation and identity in his own literary works. In *The Cow*, he delves into the psychological conflict of a man who awakens to find himself transformed into a cow, mirroring Kafka's exploration of existential anxiety and the fragmentation of the self. As Zoleikhae observes, "the transformation of Mashadi Hasan has been compared to that of Samsa in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*" (2014: 94).

#### **4.4.3 Resistance and Critique: Parallel Narratives**

Both Kafka and Saedi utilized their literary skills to confront oppressive structures and societal norms. Kafka's exploration of bureaucracy and totalitarianism resonates with Saedi's sharp portrayal of the Iranian regime. In Kafka's *The Trial* (1925), the main character faces an endless trial without any apparent reason, whereas Saedi's *The Grave and the Cradle*<sup>4</sup> (1966) reveals the corruption and deceit that pervade Iranian society.

#### **4.4.4. Legacy and Influence**

The influence of Kafka is deeply connected to the literary legacy of Saedi. By incorporating Kafkaesque features into his Persian narratives, Saedi broadened the scope of Iranian literature. His writings have profoundly motivated a new wave of authors who delve into themes of existentialism, identity, and resistance, all viewed through the prism of the Kafkaesque tradition.

#### 4.5. The Social, Cultural, and Political Background

Saedi explores the intricacies of Iranian society through his profound literary works. *The Cow* provides readers with a captivating viewpoint on the political and cultural landscape of Iran during that era. It is crucial to analyze the elements that led to the development of this esteemed work.

##### 4.5.1. Western Cultural Influences

The 1960s represented a pivotal era in Iranian history with the establishment of *The Mourners of Bayal*. This period was characterized by swift modernization in Iran, which resulted in a confrontation between traditional values and the increasing influence of Western culture. These changes signified a vital juncture in the nation's socio-cultural outlook.

The cultural environment of Pahlavi society was profoundly influenced by Western elements, especially in literature, cinema, and fashion. Among the numerous Iranian writers, Saedi distinguished himself through his works that predominantly mirrored an "imitation of traditional and modern European playwriting style" (Ghannadan et al. 669). Iranian intellectuals were engaged in a struggle with the opposing concepts of tradition and modernity, a conflict exacerbated by these cultural exchanges. This discord sparked debates regarding the safeguarding of national heritage amidst modernization, as Western cultural aspects collided with traditional values. In his literary creations, Saedi frequently explored these conflicts, illustrating the identity crises and quests for meaning faced by his characters in a society undergoing rapid transformation.

##### 4.5.2. Turbulent Political Climate

Saedi's life unfolded during a time of considerable political upheaval in Iran. The 1953 coup d'état, executed by foreign powers against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, had a significant impact on Iranian society. While Saedi was developing his artistic works, the political atmosphere in Iran was intensely charged. The Shah's regime was strengthening its authority and implementing authoritarian tactics to transform society and stifle dissent. The government's policies, particularly the White Revolution, sparked widespread socio-political unrest, leading activists and intellectuals, including Saedi, to challenge the regime. As he was unable to express his dissenting opinions openly, he channeled them through a blend of literature and art.

### **4.5.3. Critiquing Social Structures**

*The Cow* acts as a reflection of the sociopolitical environment of its time, highlighting the tensions between entrenched traditions and the progressive aspirations of Iranian society. Saedi skillfully weaves together themes of social inequality, gender roles, political corruption, and the pursuit of personal freedom. This narrative serves as a sharp critique of societal norms, gender dynamics, and the influence of religion. *The Cow* exposes the oppressive nature of power structures and emphasizes the difficulties faced by marginalized groups within Iranian society. Saedi illustrates the isolated, hopeless, uninformed, and superstitious lives of his characters; through this depiction, he reveals their vanity, ignorance, and disillusionment in a context of oppression and a failure to grasp reality (Arasteh and Zolfaghary 8048). Saedi's exploration of the dynamics between individuals and institutions offers a thoughtful critique of the society's flaws and ambitions.

### **4.5.4. Iran's Socioeconomic Landscape**

In Saedi's era, Iran experienced significant socioeconomic transformations. The country transitioned from a traditional agrarian system to a more industrialized framework. This rapid urbanization led to an influx of rural residents migrating to urban areas like Tehran, resulting in social disparities and cultural clashes between longstanding traditions and modern aspirations.

### **4.5.5. Political Repression and Censorship**

The Pahlavi Era was marked by considerable political oppression and rigorous censorship, as the regime sought to uphold its power and suppress dissent. This atmosphere of censorship, particularly evident in literary forms such as storytelling and poetry, led a group of writers, including Saedi, to pivot towards playwriting. They utilized the symbolic nature of this genre to convey their messages and ideas (Mohammadi et al. 187). Saedi, known for his critical insights into social and political issues, faced various forms of censorship and restrictions on his literary work. *The Mourners of Bayal* exemplifies the author's dissatisfaction with the oppressive regime and his attempt to express complex socio-political critiques through allegorical and metaphorical means.

### **4.5.6. Impact and Legacy**

*The Mourners of Bayal*, along with Saedi's other literary contributions, played a pivotal role in the emergence of a movement referred to as the New Wave<sup>5</sup> in Iranian literature.

This artistic movement, which took shape in the 1960s, is distinguished by its break from conventional narrative forms and a heightened focus on social issues, political themes, and the complexities of the human experience. Honarpisheh notes that *The Cow* is considered as one of "the most celebrated" work within "the Iranian New Wave" (136). Saedi's influence on this movement has consistently motivated subsequent generations of Iranian writers and artists, underscoring the enduring significance of literature in shaping societal discourse.

#### **4.6. Significance of Saedi's *The Cow***

Saedi has profoundly influenced Persian literature with his writings, which adeptly merge social commentary with compelling storytelling. His short story, *The Cow*, featured in the 1965 collection *Azādārān-i Bayal*, remains a source of interest for both readers and critics. This narrative has played a crucial role in the development of Iranian literature and is esteemed as a foundational work, particularly within the progressive literary movements of the 1960s, especially in relation to the novel's modernization. The researcher explores the literary importance and contemporary relevance of *The Cow*, highlighting the elements that contribute to its distinguished position in Iranian literature.

##### **4.6.1. Narrative Technique**

*The Cow* is notable for its innovative narrative structure, which effectively integrates elements of magical realism with a realistic depiction of Iranian society. Abdolmaleki asserts that Saedi employs magical realism to externalize the violence linked to modernization. His portrayal of civil servants maneuvering through a suffocating bureaucratic landscape underscores critiques of bureaucracy, mechanization, and economic inequality, resonating with the ideas expressed by Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969) and Ali Shariati (1933–1977) (Abdolmaleki 9). Saedi skillfully weaves together various storylines, blending past and present, as well as reality and fantasy, to create a complex narrative that mirrors the nuances of human experience. This experimental approach enhances the literary value of the play by challenging conventional storytelling methods. Saedi's adept narrative construction adds layers of meaning and symbolism, resulting in a rich and multifaceted reading experience. Through allegory, Saedi delves into profound social and political issues, while the use of magical realism introduces an atmospheric and surreal quality to the narrative. MirAbedini observes that Saedi explores the psychological and social effects of violence on everyday people by moving beyond realism and venturing into a realm that can be described as surrealism or fantasia-realism (325-326).

#### **4.6.2. Social Critique**

Saedi depicts the inescapable fate of contemporary humanity, as highlighted by Isazadeh HajiAgha et al., who exist within a regressive society that has not yet achieved progress. The character illustrated is trapped by superstitions and the insignificant customs typical of such a community. The narrative of *The Cow*, as further discussed by Isazadeh HajiAgha et al., examines this society from various perspectives. In the realm Saedi portrays, prayer and curses are the primary methods individuals employ to confront their difficulties. The omnipresent shadow of poverty affects every aspect of this community, which bears similarities to primitive societies (134).

Saedi utilizes *The Cow* as a vehicle to examine various aspects of Iranian society during his time. The play addresses themes such as gender disparity, poverty, corruption, religious hypocrisy, and the misuse of authority. The protagonist, Mashd Hassan, embodies a destitute individual who endures the hardships imposed by a corrupt and oppressive regime. Through the narrative of Mashd Hassan's life, Saedi exposes the pervasive injustices and inequalities that exist within his society, encouraging critical contemplation on the essence of power, the struggles of the marginalized, and the tenacity of individuals amidst adversity. Saedi adeptly highlights the challenges faced by ordinary citizens while shedding light on societal flaws through vivid characterizations and evocative imagery. The literary significance of *The Cow* is further enhanced by this social commentary, acting as a reflective mirror to the urgent issues confronting contemporary society.

#### **4.6.3. Exploration of Existential Themes**

Shariati asserts that Saedi merges a profound commitment to his art with a distinctive approach he refers to as "psychedelic Realism," leading to creations that question and transform conventional genres. Through this groundbreaking perspective, he addresses urgent political matters, social issues, economic inequalities, and the existential concerns that are widespread among his contemporaries (41). In *The Cow*, existential motifs are examined with both nuance and profundity. The struggle for survival and meaning faced by Mashd Hassan reflects the wider existential distress encountered by humanity. Saedi, deeply immersed in the human condition, explores themes of identity, purpose, and the search for significance.

#### **4.6.4. Psychological Depth**

Saedi's body of work is distinguished by profound psychological and social observations, a critical analysis of middle-class life, innovative literary techniques, and a keen



awareness of political oppression (Abdolmaleki 62). The psychological depth and complexity are hallmark traits of Saedi's character portrayals in *The Cow*. Readers are able to form genuine connections with each character, as they are depicted with unique desires, fears, and motivations. The literary quality of the play is further elevated by Saedi's skillful examination of the intricacies of human psychology.

*The Cow* offers a sophisticated understanding of human nature to its audience. Saedi's portrayal of the protagonist, Mashd Hassan, in *The Cow* serves as a compelling exploration of the human psyche when confronted with extreme adversity. As Mashd Hassan descends into madness, Saedi skillfully navigates themes of trauma, guilt, and the precariousness of mental health. This psychological intricacy enhances the narrative's literary significance by providing a profound analysis of the human experience.

#### 4.6.5. Cultural Relevance

*The Cow* by Saedi holds significant cultural relevance in Iranian literature, particularly as it was released during a period characterized by social and political turmoil. Saedi adeptly captures the essence of this time by delving into themes of corruption, poverty, and the fight for existence. This work reflects the stark realities faced by marginalized communities within Iranian society, offering valuable perspectives on the country's culture and historical background, thus positioning itself as an important cultural and historical artifact.

### 5. Similarities and Differences between Saedi's *The Cow* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

Saedi's *The Cow* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* are recognized as seminal works that have significantly influenced the viewpoints of many writers. Both stories delve into themes of oppression, alienation, and the intricacies of the human condition. However, despite their common thematic elements, the two texts exhibit considerable differences in their character portrayals, narrative structures, and the cultural contexts in which they are set.

Both authors utilize their narratives to provide sharp critiques of societal norms. Saedi's representation of marginalized individuals, exemplified by the character Mashd Hassan, mirrors the realities of Iranian society in the 1960s, whereas Kafka's depiction of Gregor Samsa's transformation highlights the dehumanizing effects of capitalism and alienation. Each author emphasizes the oppressive nature of societal expectations and conventions.

A recurring theme in both narratives is transformation, highlighting the significant changes individuals undergo that reflect societal oppression and alienation. In *The Cow*,

the main character's transformation is embodied by the cow, symbolizing societal limitations, while in *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor's transformation into an insect represents alienation and a crisis of existence. Both stories delve into the psychological and emotional impacts of these transformations on individuals and their relationships with others.

Both literary works delve into the complexities of the human condition by examining the emotional and psychological struggles encountered by their protagonists. The transformation of Gregor Samsa acts as a symbol of his oppression and exploitation within a capitalist system, whereas Mashd Hassan's experiences highlight the vulnerability of marginalized populations in society. Through their use of symbolism, Saedi and Kafka reveal the dehumanizing effects of societal structures, prompting a critical analysis of the communities depicted in their stories. They demonstrate how oppressive social norms can exploit and alienate individuals who do not conform, urging readers to reflect on the harsh realities that can infiltrate social settings.

Additionally, both Saedi and Kafka employ a distinctive narrative approach that intertwines reality with fantasy. By integrating elements of absurdity and surrealism, the unforeseen transformations faced by the protagonists challenge conventional perceptions of reality, creating a strange and disconcerting ambiance. These surreal aspects enhance the primary themes of both narratives, illustrating the authors' fascination with the irrational dimensions of human existence.

The two works also present significant differences. Saedi's *The Cow* focuses on the social challenges of early 20th-century Iran, highlighting local battles against oppression and tyranny. Conversely, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* explores themes of alienation and the dehumanizing consequences of modernity within a European framework.

A significant distinction can be observed in the narrative techniques employed by the two works. In Saedi's *The Cow*, the author adopts a third-person narrative style, which presents an objective perspective on the events as they unfold. This approach allows readers to maintain a certain level of detachment, enabling them to observe the narrative from an external vantage point. In contrast, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* employs a close third-person perspective that closely mirrors Gregor's experiences, granting readers a more intimate and personal insight into his thoughts and emotions.

*The Cow* features a linear narrative that focuses on the life of Mashd Hassan, a mentally challenged and impoverished man who forms a deep bond with a cow. The

straightforward nature of the narrative allows readers to easily track the progression of the story.

On the other hand, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* showcases a more intricate and unique narrative structure. The primary plot centers on the protagonist's startling realization of his transformation into a large insect. The narrative delves into the psychological and emotional responses of both Gregor and his family to this extraordinary change. Kafka's storytelling technique intertwines surreal and realistic elements, resulting in a fragmented yet engaging narrative style. Through a thorough exploration of the characters' inner thoughts and feelings, Kafka offers profound insights into the psychological dimensions of the narrative.

*The Cow* presents a critical examination of social and political matters within a realistic context, enriched with allegorical components. In contrast, *The Metamorphosis* fosters a surreal and dreamlike atmosphere by blending symbolism, absurdity, and realism. While Kafka's symbols are broad and abstract, Saedi's allusions are rooted in Persian cultural references.

The protagonists in these stories are depicted in distinctly contrasting ways. Mashd Hassan undergoes a psychological transformation as he takes on the identity and traits of his deceased cow. This change serves as a commentary on the political and social conditions in Iran at that time, underscoring the oppression and challenges experienced by the people. In contrast, Gregor Samsa's transformation into an insect underscores themes of existentialism, absurdity, and the profound isolation that individuals can experience, representing his alienation and dehumanization in a metaphorical sense.

The core themes of the two works differ markedly. *The Cow* focuses on social and political critique, particularly highlighting power dynamics and the pursuit of freedom. It urges readers to challenge oppressive systems and examine the actions of those in authority. Conversely, *The Metamorphosis* offers a bleak view of human nature, delving into existential themes and the inherent absurdity of life.

## 6. Conclusion

In Saedi's *The Cow*, the protagonist's symbolic transformation into a cow represents the oppressive societal conditions and the dehumanization faced by individuals. This change invites critical contemplation of the existing power dynamics and social hierarchies within Iranian society, with the cow symbolizing those who are marginalized and voiceless. The transformation of Mashd Hassan into a cow in Saedi's narrative poignantly illustrates the dehumanizing consequences of societal oppression and discriminatory

practices. The story examines both the internal and external transformations of the character, underscoring the erosion of personal freedom and autonomy. Through *The Cow*, Saedi reflects on the political and social realities in Iran, where conformity is mandated and dissent is harshly punished. The narrative underscores the fragile essence of human identity and the imperative to resist oppressive systems that suppress individuality.

In contrast to the metaphorical transformation illustrated in Mashd Hassan's *The Cow*, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* portrays a literal change of Gregor Samsa into an insect. This transformation symbolizes Gregor's alienation from both his family and the broader society. Through Gregor's experience, Kafka explores themes such as Existentialism, alienation, and the absurdity inherent in human existence. The novella also addresses issues related to self-identity, self-worth, and the impact of societal expectations on an individual's life.

When examined from a cultural perspective, both *The Cow* and *The Metamorphosis* reflect the distinct socio-political contexts in which they were produced. Kafka's narrative captures the anxieties and uncertainties prevalent in early 20th-century Europe, while Saedi's *The Cow* reflects the oppressive political climate of his era. These cultural contexts enhance the narratives and offer deeper insights into the texts. A comparative analysis of these works fosters a greater appreciation of their unique literary attributes and uncovers similarities in how different societies respond to change and social constraints.

### **Endnotes**

*The Cow* [Gāv], the fourth narrative in Saedi's anthology *The Mourners of Bayal* [Azā'dārān-i Bayal], is included in a series of eight interrelated short stories. In 1969, Dariush Mehrjui (1939-2023) directed a cinematic interpretation of *The Cow*, featuring Ezzatolah Entezami (1924-2018) in the principal role of Mashd Hassan. Certain critics regard it as a seminal work within the Iranian New Wave cinema movement.

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<sup>6</sup> Ravāyat-i Mudirn va Mawj-i Naw-i Sīnamā-yi Īran

<sup>7</sup> Barrasī va Shakhshīyat-pardāzī-yi Dāstān-i Gāv-i Ghulām-Husayn Sāidī

<sup>8</sup> Pajūhishhāy-i Mīyān-Rishtahī-yi Adabīyāt va Farhang (Barāzmān)

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<sup>9</sup> Sad Sāl Dāstān-navīsī dar Īrān

<sup>10</sup> *Gāv*; *Maskh*; Muqāyisah-yi Shīvah-yi Pardāzish-i Shakhshīyat dar *Gāv*-i Sāidī va *Maskh*-i Kāfkā

<sup>11</sup> Zabān va Adab-i Fārsī

<sup>12</sup> *Azādārān-i Bayal*

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<sup>13</sup> Naqd-i Jāmīī'shināsānīy-i Dāstān-i Gāv, Asar-e Ghulām-Ḥusayn Sāidī

<sup>14</sup> Majmūiy-i Maqālīhāy-i Dahumīn Hamāyish-i bein-almilali-yi Tarvij-i Zabān va Adab-i Fārsī

<sup>15</sup> Dānishgāh-i Muhaqqiq-i Ardabīlī