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A Hypocrite Protagonist: Iranian Picaresque Features of *Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court* by Iraj Pezeshkzad

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Abstract

Though *Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court* is a known novel in contemporary satirical Persian literature, its picaresque features have never been systematically studied. This descriptive-analytical research investigates how such features in the narrative structure and characterization of this novel have been localized and what innovations in combining those features with Persian traditional narrative style are achieved. First, the narrative and episodic structure, the satirical language, and the protagonist's actions are classified. Then, through a thematic analysis, the function of each feature (travel, poverty, trickery, and disguise) in the socio-critical approach of the text are discussed. The theoretical framework is based on Abrams and Geoffrey (2012) and Cuddens' (1979) definitions. The findings show the episodes contain three balanced layers of verbal, situational, and structural satire that reveal a localized background to show the social and cultural inequalities of the time. Traveling in time is a symbolic quest for social justice. Poverty and trickery become the protagonist's motivation through which a bitter satire and popular creativity is achieved. Besides, the disguises turn the obscure identity into a device for revealing the power structure and the corrupted bureaucratic system. This study provides a model for studying contemporary Persian picaresque texts. The model helps us to recognize a combination of Western features of the genre and Persian narrative traditions.

Keywords: *Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court*, Iraj Pezeshk-Zad, Picaresque.

1. Introduction

In contemporary Persian literature, a systematic study of Picaresque, as a literary genre, and its critical and challenging features are not done. However, the satirical, episodic structure of this genre can provide us with a new outlook for studying the interaction between traditional Persian storytelling style and the modern narrative experience. The significant gap in the research is noticeable because in the World literature, picaresque has always been the source for changing or criticizing the social structures. The application of this genre in the cultural context of Iran can reveal the innovations in the narrative style. In other words, the lack of some systematic study on the localization of this supposedly Western genre has prevented us to obtain a clear image to see how this genre has been absorbed and reproduced in Persian narratives.

The main issue of this study is to show the distinction and overlap of picaresque novel and traditional Persian satire. On the one hand, picaresque shows the individual narrative of an opportunist protagonist and bitterly reveals the shortcomings of the social structures. On the other hand, Classical Persian satire such as *Maqamat* and anecdotes of *Golestan* convey moral and social teachings in their allegorical structures. This study suggests how the combination of picaresque with minute implications of Iranian satire has created a new genre in contemporary Persian literature.

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Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court by Iraj Pezeshk-Zad is a localized prominent sample of such a combination. The novelist takes advantage of satire and episodic structure to put a low class character in the Abbasid's court. Through deceit and cunning, this character challenges the social conflicts and bureaucratic corruptions of contemporary Iran. The transitional time between modern Iran and Harun's era, creates a background to satirize the injustice and the social power structure without deviation from the traditional style of texts like *Golestan* or *Maqamat*. In other words, this novel is a suitable case for doing a comparative study between picaresque features and Persian satire. It also gives us a strong analytical background to provide a model for the localization of such features in contemporary Persian literature.

1.1. Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

In spite of the bulk of studies on genres in contemporary literary criticism in Iran, the basic question which is neglected is to discuss how picaresque structure and its features have developed in Persian satiric narratives. That is, whether such elements and structures in *Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court* are genuinely localized or are just a set of imitated, imported features. The focal point of this research is to discuss the proportion of classic features of picaresque to the critical localization of these features in a Persian narrative frame.

Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court is the depiction of a creative, deceitful resistance against corruptions and power structures. That is, a simple-minded but cunning protagonist of a low social class tries to save himself from critical situations. The episodic structure of the novel possesses a unified integrity that mixes social humor and sharp implicit or explicit criticism of the inequalities and bureaucratic corruptions. Therefore, the two research questions of this research are:

- 1) How are picaresque features in characterization and narration localized in this novel?
- 2) What innovative narrative and thematic features are achieved in such localization process?

This study focuses on some main features of picaresque. That is, travel, poverty, trickery, disguise, and episodic structure are analyzed through a generic and narrative approach. Besides, Persian satirical device is introduced in a way that it provides a conceptual model for Persian picaresque.

1.2. Methodology

This study is descriptive-analytical. First, on the basis of [Abrams and Geoffrey's \(2012\)](#) definitions, the main features of picaresque such as the low-class protagonist, the episodic structure, the social satire, and the adventurous travels are extracted. Second, the combination of the structural analysis and the satiric semiotics are applied to *Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court*. The focus of the study is on the process of localization of elements in a Persian literary background so as to illuminate innovations in the critical discourse of the novel.

1.3. Literature Review

Most of the studies that have dealt with the picaresque genre present a comparative and historical approach. Few studies considered the innovative or localized achievements of this genre in contemporary Persian literature. In the literature review, first, the theoretical sources that define picaresque are reviewed. Then, some comparative studies on Western and Eastern texts are mentioned. Finally, some Persian texts of this genre are reviewed.

1.3.1. Theoretical Framework and Definition

An important book in the field of our study is *The Picaresque* by [Sieber \(1997\)](#). The main features of the genre such as the episodic structure, the low class protagonist, the bitter satire, and the adventurous travel are discussed there. While the book is theoretically significant, its focus is on European literature of the previous centuries. That is, it does not refer to the possibility of any comparison or evolution in a different cultural context.

[GhunaymiHilal \(2012\)](#) in his book *Adab Al-Muqaran* states that the origin of picaresque is in the East and Maqameh is the prototype of Picaresque. However, he does not provide any structural or cultural analysis for his statements. Although his idea is noticeable, he does not mention the modern, social, or satirical features of picaresque.

1.3.2. Comparative Studies: Picaresque and Maqameh

In this group of studies, the main concerns have been the similarities or the common points between the two genres. *The Origin of Picaresque: The East or the West* by [Sharifpoor et al. \(2016\)](#) states that the structure and the style of picaresque are borrowed from the tradition of Arabic Maqameh. It also discusses the intertextual features of both genres but does not mention the evolution of these features in a contemporary Persian literary context.

A Structural Analysis of Maqamate Hamidi and the Golistan by [Shafagh and Asmand Jouneghani \(2015\)](#) reveals that Saadi is influenced by the tradition of writing Maqameh but his innovation in the structure of *Golistan* has made this book a distinctive and independent text. The article entitled *The Impact of Maqamate Hamidi on the Golistan and the Bustan* ([Mohammadi, 2018](#)) provides a comparative analysis in which such an impact is confirmed. It also emphasizes on the fact that Saadi has combined the elements of Maqameh with the Iranian taste and improved these elements.

The study done by [MohammadiFesharaki and Khodadadi \(2015\)](#) under the title of *An Analysis of the Structural Connection between Picaresque and Maqameh* discusses the characterization, the episodic structure, and the satirical language. It also depicts a relationship between the two genres. Moreover, [Bashiri and Jamshidi \(2018\)](#) in *Picaresque and Maqameh*, [Arab Yousef Abadi and Bamshaki \(2005\)](#) in *A Comparative Study of Maqameh and Picaresque* come to the conclusion that picaresque is a developed form of Maqameh. These studies, however, are within a historical-comparative frame and do not provide any functional or innovative approach.

1.3.3. Application of Picaresque Features (Persian Case Studies)

Some studies in which a comparative approach is applied include a thesis by [Rahimian \(2014\)](#) entitled *A Comparative Study of Persian, Arabic Maqameh and Spanish Picaresque*, [Lotfi \(2016\)](#) entitled *A Structural Comparison of Samak Aiar and Don Quixote*. These studies focus on structural similarities but do not offer any semiotic, narrative, or cultural analysis. [Nouraii \(2019\)](#) in *Picaresque Characters in Iranian and Foreign Stories* makes a comparison between classic Persian texts such as *Golestan*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *Gil Blas* but instead of discussing the narrative innovations of the Persian texts, it provides an educational approach through the enumeration of the features.

Among the recent studies, [Saidi and Bamshaki \(2022\)](#) is a rare effort that analyzes a Persian text with regard to the picaresque elements. It entitled *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isfahan as a Picaresque Text* and focuses on the picaresque character. It investigates the narrative on the basis of Western patterns. The study, however, compares the features and has nothing to do with the structural innovations or the localization of the style.

1.3.4. The Research Gap

As the literature review has already shown, the previous studies were theoretical or comparative attempts in discussing picaresque and Maqameh as similar genres. The lack of an analytical approach in studying a contemporary satiric text with emphasis upon the localization of picaresque is the research gap that is filled in this study. That is, it shows how the classical known elements of picaresque are recreated in a Persian background.

2. The Theoretical Framework

Picaresque is a significant genre in Western narrative tradition. It goes back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Spain. This period of history experienced economic crisis, the dissolution of aristocratic values, and the prevalent poverty and social injustice. In response to these facts, the voice of the low social classes could be heard through satiric, deconstructive, and realistic narratives.

2.1. Definitions of Picaresque

According to [Abrams and Geoffrey \(2012\)](#), “Picaro” is a Spanish for “rogue,” and a typical story concerns the escapades of an insouciant rascal who lives by his wits and shows little if any alternation of character through a long succession of adventures. Picaresque fiction is realistic in manner, episodic in structure (that is, it composed of a sequence of events held together largely because they happened to one person), and often satiric in aim (p. 253).

According to [Cudden \(1979\)](#), “The picaresque novel tells the life of a knave or picaroon who is the servant of several masters. Through his experience this picaroon satirizes the society in which he lives” (p. 505).

These characteristics make the genre a powerful instrument for criticizing the social and moral structures of any era.

2.2. Picaresque Features

In order to define picaresque features in a practical conceptual pattern that can be applied to the study of non-Western or localized texts, the following model is developed through a combination of Abrams and Cudden’s definitions of the term.

2.2.1. The Picaroon

A rootless, vagabond, with no moral principles who is cunning, humorous, and satirical in his behavior.

2.2.2. The Episodic Structure

Instead of a unified, organized form of a plot, the sequence of various events consists the individual’s experiences.

2.2.3. The First Person Point of View

The narrator is mostly the picaroon him/herself that bitterly satirizes the world in which he/she lives.

2.2.4. Social Criticism and Anti-Establishment

Each episode usually contains implicit or explicit criticism of social, religious, political, or economic structures.

2.2.5. Poverty, Hunger, Travel, and Law Breaking

These are elements that are metaphorically employed to express the identity crisis or the survival skills.

In addition to the classic features, Bakhtin’s notion of Carnival in literature that overlaps with picaresque are helpful. In his opinion, the unstable and unreliable atmosphere of Carnival creates the possibility for the marginal and oppressed voices to be heard. That is, characters such as the picaroon can subvert the official structures to reveal the suppressed realities of the time.

An eclectic combination of these elements and definitions make the theoretical framework of our study. That is, *Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid’s Court* is discussed on the basis of the following items:

- 1) Picaroon and his anti-heroic characteristics are recognized and analyzed in Mashala-Khan’s personality;
- 2) The narrative structure is discussed through its subsequent episodes;
- 3) Social satire is traced through the discourse of the protagonist while he faces the bureaucratic, religious, and legislative institutions; and
- 4) The language as a means through which the picaroon survives and subverts the dominant discourse is studied and commented upon.

Through the above-mentioned items, a conceptual, practical pattern for the textual analysis is at our disposal. To sum up, the theoretical elements of the study are put in the following model which is practically employed in the analysis of the characterization,

narrative, and thematic features of the novel.

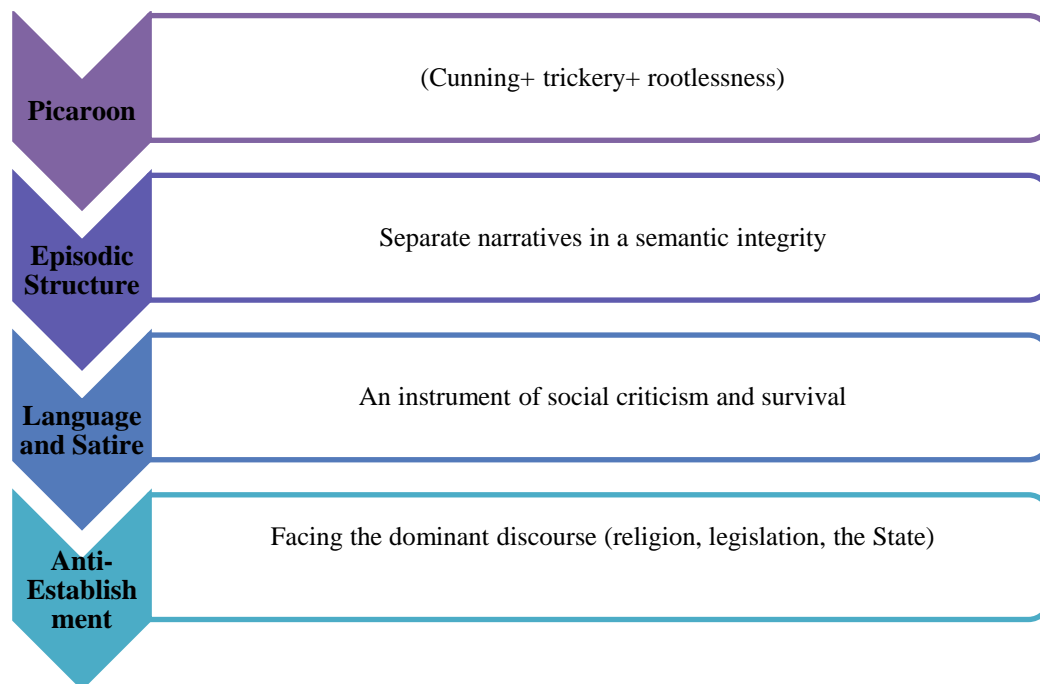


Figure 1. Picaresque Elements

3. An Overview of the Novel

Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court show Pezeshkzad's concerns regarding social differences and problems. Class distinctions in the society are considered as the roots of other problems by this novelist. Through exaggeration and imagination, Pezeshkzad takes his protagonist back in time, to the court of Harun al-Rashid. Mashala-Khan has great expectations in that court but he very soon gets disillusioned about the glory of the reign. In the moment he arrives into the court, he is treated as the prime suspect and gets arrested. From this moment, he gets involved in different sorts of difficulties. The predicaments become so frustrating that he wished to come back to his own period and have a simple, routine life from which he ran away. It is through the depiction of such frustration that the novelist provides a critique of the shortcomings and contradictions of contemporary modern Iran.

3.1. A Summary of the Novel

The main character of *Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court* is a bank security guard who is not content with his social condition. He dreams a sweet life in *Harun al-Rashid's Court*. His illusion is based on the history books he has read about the Abbasid Caliph and his reign (786-809). The dreams he nourishes and the impossibility of achieving them make him blamed and ridiculed by his colleagues and managers. Once in the street, he finds an advertisement about an Indian hermit who claims to have the ability to take people back into the past. Mashala-Khan, who is bored with his own life, asks the hermit to send him to the reign of Harun al-Rashid. Through the magic power of the hermit, this travel in time takes place.

While he arrives into the court, Mashala-Khan's curiosity about the death of the Barmakids makes the courtiers suspicious of him. He gets arrested and is supposed to be released if he kills the dangerous lion that lies in the entrance of the seraglio. He has no choice but to accept the condition because it may give him the chance to escape Baghdad. When he is left alone with the lion, he uses his pistol to kill the lion. This seemingly victorious challenge leaves him in a more complex condition. That is, he accidentally enters into the seraglio but finds out that any man who is there must be castrated. When the order of the castration is to be executed, Abu-Maghsood, the chief bodyguard demands Mashala-Khan to spy on Jafar Barmakid and Abasee, the Caliph's sister, who have a secret love affair. It is the only pre-condition to ignore the castration order. Mashala-Khan accepts this and soon becomes an important person in the seraglio.

In the caliphate's feast, secrets of the unfulfilled order is revealed and Harun al-Rashid gets furious and Mashala-Khan has to escape the seraglio. The executioner's sister, Samieh, helps him and after so many incidents, he is again arrested by Masroor, the executioner. He is forced to marry Samieh. After the marriage ceremony, he is assisted by someone called Akbar Irani and escapes the house in the disguise of a pregnant woman. In the alleys of Baghdad, Abu-Maghsoor, the chief officer, inspects him and believes the story of the pregnancy. He leads Mashala-Khan to his own house because he thinks the woman is in labor.

In Abu-Maghsoor's house, Akbar Irani helps Mashala-Khan, they bribe the midwife to claim the baby is stillborn. Abu-Maghsoor keeps Mashala-Khan as a nanny in the seraglio to take care of Jafar Barmakid and Abasee's child. Finally, in the bathroom, his masculinity is revealed. He is again arrested and put into the lion cage. While he is alone with the so-called lion, Mashala-Khan finds out that the real lion has already died and the lion trainer who is afraid of the severe punishment puts himself in the cover of the lion and imitates the animal's movements. The two men think of a plan to hide Mashala-Khan in the lion's skin and claim that he is devoured

by the animal. They also entertain the Calipha to earn some money and escape but Mashala-Khan's identity is again known.

Mashala-Khan who has no other chance to run away, goes to the bathroom of the palace. He has hidden the pistol there. Using the weapon, he frightens the guards. The pistol's shots are miraculously synchronized with a real bank robbery. That is, everything comes back to the present time and the shooting prevents the actual robbers to do the crime. They are arrested and Mashala-Khan is known as the hero who stopped the robbery.

4. Discussion

The novel, through a satiric social criticism depicts the cultural and class differences of the time. The following part is going to trace the basic elements of picaresque within the text and to show how features such as the episodic structure, the protagonist's deception, disguise, and other picaresque elements are embedded in the novel. It also discusses how the traditional satirical elements of Persian literature are employed to create a picaresque novel in the Iranian culture.

4.1. Episodic Structure

Picaresque, in general, has an episodic structure that provides the opportunity for the author to narrate various subjects and themes independently while the seemingly separate narratives are interdependent. *Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court* follows this structure. That is, each part of the novel is dedicated to an adventure of the protagonist. Various parts create a narrative conflict through which the character's personality is gradually developed and known. These parts also represent various themes and concerns of the novelist.

While each dependent part has its own narrative and identity, it also deals with some socio-political issue of the time. In other words, power structures, cultural concerns, political and bureaucratic corruptions are mentioned in the entertaining narrative of different episodes. Such a structure allows Pezeshkzad to highlight his central themes. That is, the novel becomes an extended scope to reveal the social injustice, the class struggle, the cultural challenge, and the bureaucratic drawbacks in the satirical form of an adventurous individual imaginary experience.

4.2. Travel and Adventure

A significant feature of picaresque as a literary genre is the frame of travel and its adventures. Travel in time has always been a human desire and the novel takes advantage of this long-standing wish. Through an imaginative travel in time, Mashala-Khan goes to Harun al-Rashid's Court in the eighth century AH. At the first glance, the travel seems illusionary and absurd but because of the themes and topics within the novel, this possibility is justified through the long tradition of picaresque texts.

Mashala-Khan, a socially inferior bank guard, suffers from financial problems and social humiliations. His frustration with his routine life makes him desire a better time. He also believes that Harun al-Rashid's reign is the ideal period of history. He happens to see an Indian hermit's advertisement that claims a travel in time can be achieved through his abilities. Therefore, Mashala-Khan goes to see the hermit and demands the travel. The novelist describes the moment in these words, "The hermit lighted colored candles. Mashala-Khan's eyes were closed and he traveled back into the eighth century" (Pezeshkzad, 1959, p. 20). This travel is the frame of the whole novel which contains amusing and didactic adventures.

The motivation of the protagonist for such a travel is to get relieved from the financial predicaments and unfulfilled wishes to obtain what seems impossible to achieve in the present time. The travel, however, is not just a change in time and place; it is also a background to represent the clashes between tradition and modernity. That is, Mashala-Khan with the mentality of a contemporary Iranian arrives into a traditional world. The challenges between tradition and modernity are the foundations of the satirical approach of the novel. The differences of these two worlds create situations that are ironically hilarious and thought-provoking for the readers.

The travel provides Mashala-Khan with opportunities for social critical concerns of the novelist. The interactions between the protagonist and the courtiers in different levels reveal social and political corruption in the power structure. The narrator shows how a witty, cunning individual of a lower class of the society can take advantage of his talent to resist the injustice that prevails the whole system. The adventures, therefore, are not just phases in the plot development; they are symbolic efforts to gain identity and power to survive in a complex society that reflects contemporary Iran.

The travel also has its impact on Mashala-Khan's character. He is a frustrated, simple minded person at the beginning of the novel. Each adventure, however, makes him more experienced and resistant. In coping with poverty, misunderstanding, and betrayal, he is forced to rely on his own intelligence and creativity to find unexpected solutions. These moments show how he is capable of changing threats into opportunities. Each part of the travel makes the narrative different and foregrounds the protagonist's flexibility and courage in facing the difficulties. Mashala-Khan's travel is an innate structure of the novel that not only develops the plot but also reflects the culture and the society of the time. That is to say, travel, in this novel, creates an entertaining frame that is satirical and thoughtful. Pezeshkzad takes the readers into a travel that is not a fancy but a critique on the society and human condition.

4.3. Poverty

As a basic element of picaresque, poverty plays a great role in characterization and character development. The picaro usually belongs to the lower social classes, and people's efforts to surmount the social limitations are reflections of the conditions. The same is true about Mashala-Khan.

He is usually in the need of food. To quench his appetite, he resorts to amusing, satirical trickery, and deceit. His attempts to satisfy his needs show the desire to survive in an undesirable condition. In the interrogation scene, for example, when he is charged with the murder of Jafar Barmakid, the inspector Abdullah Khan is going to leave him alone in the cell. Mashala-Khan grabs Abdullah's arm and asks, "Abdullah Khan, hasn't Jafar Khan ordered you anything about my lunch or dinner? Sorry to say, but the fact is that I am starving; you know, my entrails are devouring each other" (PezeshkZad, 1959, p. 67)

In another example, when Mashala-Khan is on a mission to kill a wild lion, he orders some food to satisfy the lion's hunger. What he orders, however, is actually suitable and intended for his own hunger. He says, "Your highness, Dear Calipha, because the lion may

feel frightened by me and avoid getting out of its den, to tempt it come out, please order some oranges, a little fresh bread, some cheese and butter” (PezeshkZad, 1959, p. 84). This example shows how cunningly he takes advantage of a difficult situation to satisfy his own needs.

In another instance, when Mashala-Khan disguises himself as a nanny, Abasse arrives into the room and Mashala-Khan who is supposed to breastfeed the baby claims that the breasts produce no milk unless he eats a big breakfast. So he asks for such a breakfast that includes “Some milk, three eggs, one bar of butter and a bar of cheese and also some well-baked loaves of bread” (PezeshkZad, 1959, p. 267). Akbar Ajami and Agha-Bashi (the butler) make fun of the ingredients of the breakfast but again it is Mashala-Khan’s trick to eat something through some excuses.

Poverty in this novel is not just an individual problem but it actually is a socio-economic phenomenon. From an economic point of view, Mashala-Khan resorts to trickery and deceit to take what he wants. From a social prospect, this example shows and confirms the deep gaps between the needs of ordinary people and those of the courtiers. The latter group usually ridicule the former one. Culturally, the inferior group gets more determined so as to survive in a society whose human relations are increasingly fragile and less reliable.

It is noteworthy that the satire of the novel is mostly created through the situations in which poverty of the protagonist is portrayed. The author employs comic scenes to emphasize the corruption in the court, social inequality, and ethical restrictions of the society. This satire is the result of the discrepancy between the bitter reality of the and the witty reactions of the main character. It is through such satirical presentations that Mashala-Khan tries to keep his own human integrity. That is, the nanny (Mashala-Khan in disguise) mentions his needs as an individual while he is commenting on the social differences that have to be tolerated for one’s survival. This satirical approach helps to deconstruct and foreground the social inconsistencies and motivates the reader to identify the protagonist. The novel centralizes poverty and makes it the incentive for the character’s deceitful behavior. Besides, it makes use of poverty as a means to represent the harsh realities of modern Iran.

4.4. Trickery

Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid’s Court represents deceit and trickery as the vital points in the protagonist’s life. These concepts are not only employed for the survival but also for the depiction of a multi-layered personality. In difficult situations or dilemmas, Mashala-Khan resorts to telling lies, flattery, deception, and trickery. The novelist skillfully includes these elements in his narrative to develop the plot and the personality of the character. Significant examples of these elements are specifically observed in the travel to the reign of Harun al-Rashid. The curiosity of the protagonist about Jafar Barmakid’s murder leads to Ostad Samaan’s suspicion and the government’s secret agents prosecute him. This situation becomes a suitable opportunity for him to escape through deceit and trickery. The climax of his deception and roguery brings about the suspense that motivates the readers to go on reading the novel so as to recognize the combination of comic and satiric features that are discussed below.

4.4.1. Pretention

One of the prominent personal traits of Mashala-Khan is his boastful self-admiration that reveals itself in his interactions with women and major courtiers. This behavior is very much like the self-ostentation of the classic picaresque characters. It is a means to attract others’ attention and to achieve a position to which one does not belong. Mashala-Khan’s resort to pretention sometimes puts him into dangerous and ironic situations that make the narrative more entertaining.

An example to verify his pretentious behavior is the one in which his freedom becomes conditional. That is, he is supposed to kill a wild lion to get released from conviction. Therefore, he tries to boast and show off his courage to gain a chance to escape. He states, “Your Highness, killing a lion is a petty task. Give me more important missions to fulfill” (PezeshkZad, 1959, p. 82). Using a pistol, he kills the lion unintentionally and pretends that he has done it with no weapons. This is an opportunity for him to show off. It also creates a comic moment that leads into the contrast between what he claims and what he actually feels. Pezeshkzad employs pretention to continue his satirical intention in the plot development and characterization.

4.4.2. Deception in Relationships

Mashala-Khan is very much interested in boasting about his popularity among women. That is, through pretending to be courageous and powerful, he intends to impress them. This characteristic that shows his need to be noticed and appreciated by the others very often causes minute satirical situations that reveal the contrast between his claims and his true personality. In a memorable scene on page 134, he shows the photograph of a female celebrity to the women in the court and claims she is his beloved. The deception sharply delineates the discrepancy between what the reader knew and what he boasts of. It becomes a great example of situational or dramatic irony in the novel.

Pezeshk-Zad’s combination of comic and serious situations delves into human contradictions and adds a psychological aspect to the novel. The deception and roguery in relationships go beyond a simple reaction and turns into a critique of the social norms and behaviors. Mashala-Khan sometimes forges narratives and complex combination of words to play with the mind of the people around him. The naivety of the court girls that are easily manipulated adds to the irony and the satire of the text. The contrast between the protagonist’s witty deception and its impact on the others not only enriches the narrative but also provides the reader with a chance to ponder upon human vulnerability and its social consequences.

4.4.3. Lies and Vain Promises

Telling lies or making invalid promises is another personal feature of the protagonist of the novel. This is found in his forced marriage proposal to the executioner’s sister, Samieh, the hair dresser of the court. The proposal itself is intended to avoid being arrested. Therefore, he later refuses to keep his promise by making excuses. This shows another aspect of his multi-faceted character and his ability to play tricks on others so as to achieve his own purposes.

The contrast between words and actions are foregrounded by the novelist. While he promises to marry Samieh, he is making plans to escape from the palace. The unintended promises he makes create conflicts that the reader follows but at the same time s/he

sympathize with the rogue. The fact that readers take side with the deceitful protagonist of the picaresque novel is a prominent feature of the genre as well.

4.4.4. Procrastination and Evasion

To postpone his marriage to Samieh, Mashala-khan makes excuses that are odd and creative. That is, he pretends to be sick, demands unusual things, and eats lots of garlic to make Samieh resent his smelly mouth. "He peeled the garlic as fast as possible; put them in his mouth and was on the verge of vomiting. Now if this monster is brave enough, let her come to me. I suffer from rheumatism and the physician prescribed eating lots of garlic before going to bed" (PezeshkZad, 1959, p. 205).

These tricks that are satirically poignant show his intelligence and creative mind in managing difficult situations. In other words, he claims that he is committed to save people from a disaster and puts off the marriage. These intentionally invented excuses, though ridiculous, give the reader the possible access to the conflicting concepts of the character's personality. On the one hand, he is witty, intelligent, and creative; on the other hand, he is weak, unreliable, and deceitful.

4.5. Disguises

A usual feature in picaresque narratives is the resort to the disguises. The picaro may cross-dress or wear a masque to conceal his/her real identity and achieve his/her goals by the new, fake identity. Such changes are options to challenge real life's conditions. Through using disguises, writers add to the variety of their narrative and make ironic and satiric situations. In *Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court*, disguises are employed in some critical moments. The protagonist, in three major situations saves himself from danger by using disguises.

4.5.1. Being a Eunuch

To avoid being castrated, Mashala-Khan accepts to pretend that he is an eunuch and arrives into the seraglio. This hypocrisy in the cultural context of the time that propagandized precreation is a reaction against social and familial risks. In this role playing, Mashala-Khan has to retain his new identity and improve his social position according to the new challenges as well. Situational and verbal satires in this part increase and he has to tolerate the bitter atmosphere of the seraglio that is depicted through his witty comments and poignant criticism.

On the other hand, his dialogues with the eunuchs and the women in the seraglio create ironic and comic situations. An instance for such a case takes place when he is mistakenly in charge of managing an important ceremony. He has to cope with such a situation without revealing his own sexual potency. He is not content with this role but does his best to be impressive. He also controls his dissatisfaction with the hope for a better future. That is, while dreaming for being rich, he ironically tells himself, "Well, Mashala-Khan, is this the life you dreamed of? To come to Baghdad and become the supreme eunuch of Harun al-Rashid's seraglio? I have to save money and run away from this city; then I wear moustache or beard and change my name" (PezeshkZad, 1959, p. 132)

4.5.2. Wearing Women's Attire

After it is revealed that Mashala-Khan is not a eunuch, he is assisted by Samieh to wear a dress and escape from the palace. At dawn, Samieh came back to the room; she brought a dress and a borgha; she closed the door and kindly told him dear Mashala-Khan, these are for you. Mashala-Khan surprisingly asked if he has to put on the dress. But there was no other alternative. It was a do-or-die situation; so he put them on (PezeshkZad, 1959, p. 150). This part of the novel is hilariously satirical and Mashala-Khan pretends that he is a pregnant woman and is named Bente-Sakineh. He fastens a long shawl around his belly to make the fake pregnancy look believable. He also changes his voice to sound like a woman whose childbirth is impending any moment. He delicately complains of the so-called pain; "Oh, my God. I feel pain; oh, I feel suffering, ouch!" (PezeshkZad, 1959, p. 225). The midwife, who is already bribed, announces that the baby is stillborn. This part certainly foregrounds the trickery and deception and portrays the picaroon's abilities in query.

4.5.3. Using the Lion Hide

In one of the climaxes of the novel, Mashala-Khan conceals himself as a lion to escape the Calipha and the courtiers. This plan has a psychological effect on the audience and they imagine that Mashala-Khan is devoured by the lion. "Abu-Jungle opened the safety pins below the belly of the lion hide and got out. Mashala-Khan rapidly went inside the hide and Abu-Jungle fastened the pins again and refreshed his own appearance" (PezeshkZad, 1959, p. 310). This trick makes the Calipha and the courtiers confused and the suspense gets more complex for the readers. A witty, cunning plan to defeat one's enemies and to avoid the possible dangers is an integral part of picaresque novels. Pezeshkzad skillfully has created this picaresque feature.

Generally, disguises in this novel are not used for their own sake. They have pivotal roles for the development of the plot. Through identity changes, Mashala-Khan achieves new situations that are impossible to reach in a routine life. He pretends to be a eunuch; he is consequently allowed to arrive into the seraglio and finds out some information about the secret love affair between Jafar Barmakid and Calipha's sister. Through cross-dressing, the novel reveals the social structure and the hierarchy in the power relations.

In changing his appearance that leads into new identities, Mashala-Khan easily deceives the Calipha and the courtiers. This incident emphasizes the notion that power structure and social mobility are based on appearance and pretention. His disguise, as a woman, also is a means to reflect the sexual discriminations of the time. Through pretending to be a woman or a eunuch, the protagonist gets access to some places that are not ever possible for a man to enter.

5. Conclusion

Mashala-Khan in Harun al-Rashid's Court is a creative adaptation of picaresque features in a contemporary Persian text. The novel not only employs the classic characteristics of picaresque, such as the picaroon, the episodic structure, satire, poverty, travel, and

disguise but also combines them with local characteristics that enable the text to be a critical narrative of the contemporary Iranian society. In this narration, power structures, social relationships, bureaucratic corruptions, and inequalities are challenged. Through satirical imaginary, the recreation of Harun's court, and putting it against the real existential condition of the protagonist, the text confirms the lack of justice, cultural hypocrisy, and identity crisis. Besides, the simple, satirical narration provides an opportunity for common readers to face and recognize the complex social issues of the time.

The main findings of this research is that it does not discuss Pezeshkzad's novel as a satiric or imaginative historical work but it analyzes the book as a picaresque sample. While other researchers considered social satire in Pezeshkzad's writing, this study employs a theoretical model to extract picaresque features and reveal how they are adapted to the structure and narration of the novel. In this regard, this is a new attempt in the study of genres in contemporary Persian literature and creates an opportunity to interact with the world literature.

As far as the methodology is concerned, this study focuses on a particular text. It analyzes the structure, characterization, and its social atmosphere. It provides a pattern for further studies of Persian texts in which picaresque elements are observable. The limitation of the study is its focus on a single sample that leads to a narrow range of results. In other words, suggestions for further research can include other contemporary texts. Through such studies, the capacity of this genre in Persian literature and the possibility for cultural comparative research in Persian and world literature can be extensively revealed.

Finally, this study shows that Picaresque has intertextual capacities through which reconsidering the social power structures in various cultures are available. In this regard, Pezeshkzad's novel is a multi-layered, localized narrative of this genre in Persian literature.

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