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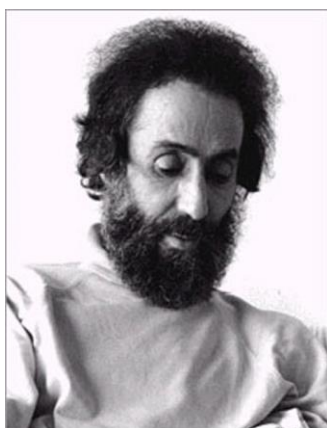
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## The Concepts of Solitude and Buddhism in Sohrab Sepehri's Poetry

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Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980)

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## Abstract

Ambiguity is the most controversial and critical issue in Sohrab Sepehri's poetry which could be considered as a result of the influence of Buddhism on the poet. The present study aims to assess the effects of Buddhism on Sohrab Sepehri's attitude and his poems. In order to achieve this goal, first, Sohrab Sepehri's biography and major works are discussed and then, the concepts of Buddha and Buddhism are explained. Finally, the influence of Buddhism on Sohrab Sepehri's poetry and his attitude towards life is investigated. Owing to the fact that 'solitude' is of great importance in Buddhist studies, the notion of solitude in Sohrab Sepehri's poetry is also examined in the current study. Sohrab Sepehri repeatedly used the word 'solitude' in his poems which can show his attitude towards life. As solitude is of great importance in Buddhism, this repetition must have been influenced by Buddhism.

**Keywords:** solitude, Sohrab Sepehri, Buddha, Buddhism, Arhat, nirvana

## 1. Introduction

Sohrab Sepehri was a notable Persian poet. He always sought truth in his works. Thanks to his widespread travels and studies, he was acquainted with the concept of Buddhism and was influenced by this school of thought. The notion of solitude, which is mostly seen in Buddhism, can be noticed in many of Sepehri's poems. This type of solitude which is based on the teachings of the Buddha make it necessary for human beings to become free of human desires in order to escape from the suffering that is part of life. Buddha refers to earthly needs as impure desires and his teachings help people to grow towards enlightenment and be Arhats.

## 2. Review of Literature

Many researches have been conducted in the field of solitude. Ghavam and Vaezzadeh (2010) accomplished a research under the title 'solitude in Persian mystical poems by Sohrab Sepehri'. In their study, they defined the idea of solitude and assessed it in Persian mystical poetry. They concluded that the concept of solitude which is frequently seen among classical mystics is derived from Persian-Islamic Mysticism and Sufism that was common in

the past. Among the practitioners of 'New Poetry' (a kind of poetry that often employs neither meter nor rhyme), Sohrab Sepehri could perfectly mingle his poems with Buddhism and mysticism, and often referred to the notions of solitude and spiritual loneliness in his compositions.

Khadivar and Hadidi (2010) did a research entitled 'Sohrab Sepehri's mysticism' and concluded that Sohrab Sepehri was a follower of far eastern philosophy and Buddhist school, rather than Islamic beliefs. Islamic and Christian ideas remain a low priority in his poems.

Fazeli and Zarezadeh (2012) conducted a study under the title 'reflection of Buddhist thoughts in contemporary Iranian poetry' and believed that Sepehri's loneliness and his tendency toward traveling can be regarded as a sign of Buddhism. He reflected Buddha's visions in his literary works, since he was influenced by Buddhism and attempted to fulfill the Buddhist teachings.

Baghinezahd and Alizadeh (2010) in their work entitled 'Sohrab Sepehri's intuition, symbols and poetry' stated that Sohrab Sepehri considered solitude as a symbol of ecstasy and mediation and applied this lexicon in order to describe his pleasant loneliness. Sepehri's solitude helped him to accomplish the state of ecstasy and contemplation, which is mostly achievable by mystics and Sufis. Sepehri's mysticism is to a certain extent similar to Zen Buddhism that is directed towards achieving mystical union with Buddha. Solitude is an effective and widely used symbol in Sepehri's poetry which describes such feelings. He employed this word in order to explain various dimensions of his life. Solitude gave Sepehri an opportunity to reach the ultimate nature of existence and enlightenment, and be able to perceive the world in a spiritual way. He adored solitude, since he could forget himself and feel totally free.

### **3. Sohrab Sepehri's Biography**

Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980), son of Asadollah and Mahjabin, was born in Kashan. He was a practitioner of New Poetry which had been introduced by NimaYushij. Like other practitioners of this form, he used new means to express his thoughts and feelings. He used his poetry very common vocabularies which had not been previously used in the poems,

especially by traditional poets. His tendency toward Far Eastern mysticism can be overtly observed in his poetry (Savarsofla, 2008: 11).

Many of the vocabularies seen in Sepehri's poems cause readers a sense of ambiguity. Being aware of Buddhism and its effects on Sepehri's poetry can help readers to comprehend his works more correctly; therefore, a brief introduction of Buddhism and Buddha's life is made and then, its influence on Sepehri's poetry is discussed.

#### **4. 1. Buddha's Life**

Gautama Buddha was born in Lumbini in the south of Nepal, near Kapilavastu around the year 560 BCE. He was from a royal family, son of King Śuddhodana, who was the leader of Shakya clan. Before being known as Buddha, which means woken up to reality, he was named Shakyamuni. After his *parinirvana*, he was addressed using very respected titles such as 'Buddha', 'Siddhartha', 'Tathagata', 'Arihand', and 'he who achieved his aim'.

#### **4.2. Buddhism**

Some of the fundamentals of the teachings attributed to Buddha can be named in the following manner:

- The Four Noble Truths
- Foundations of Mindfulness
- The Four Sublime or Uplifted States
- Samsara
- Paticcasamuppada
- Nirvana
- Arhat

##### **4.2.1. The Four Noble Truths**

The four noble truths can be named as 1) suffering, 2) cause of suffering, 3) end of suffering, and 4) path to end suffering.

Buddha believes that human beings are born with suffering. Birth equals suffering and death is again accompanied with suffering. When we are born we cry, and when we want to die, we suffer. None of us wants to die and we feel sorrow when someone dies. Being with those we dislike, being apart from those we love, not getting what we want, and everything existing in this world is a kind of suffering (Pashae, 1999: 133).

Desire, need and lust are the causes of suffering. Whatever human beings enjoy and perceive such as seeing, hearing, feeling, and smelling is the origin of suffering. If we ponder over this world, we consider it nothing but the origin of suffering (Emad, 1998, 12).

To end suffering, one must cut off greed and desire which means changing their views toward life and suppress their wants and needs. Buddhists call the state in which all suffering is ended Nirvana. Nirvana is an everlasting state of great joy and peace. The Buddha said, "The extinction of desire is Nirvana." This is the ultimate goal in Buddhism. Those who experience Nirvana are not trapped into the earthly desires of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching or tasting (ibid).

The path to end suffering is known as the **Noble Eightfold Path** which can be named as follows: right view, right thought, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This eightfold path can be achieved by adhering to the four aforementioned rules. Suppressing the desires gives real Buddhists great pleasure and helps them to accomplish their goal and discover the great truth which is the basis of noble eightfold path.

#### **4.2.2. Foundations of Mindfulness**

Four foundations are described for maintaining and developing mindfulness and can be explained in the following manner: 1) mindfulness of the body, 2) mindfulness of feelings (or sensations), 3) mindfulness of mind (or consciousness), and 4) mindfulness of mental phenomena (or mental objects).

#### **4.2.3. The Four Sublime or Uplifted States**

The four sublime states of mind taught by Buddha are loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. First three states are required to achieve the fourth one, to become happy of others' happiness or sad of others' sadness (ibid: 37-38). Loving-kindness can be considered as the love of a mother for her child who can endanger herself to save her child's life. Compassion is similar to the state of a mother who supports her child in decreasing his disappointment (ibid: 41).

Sympathetic joy refers to the state of taking pleasure in observing others' happiness (ibid).

The last state, equanimity, stands for the fact that our life is the result of our thoughts, speeches, and bodies. It pervades our past and future, and whatever we do during the process of our life (ibid: 43).

#### **4.2.4. Samsara**

All Indian religions and schools share the notion of samsara which literally means continuous movement or cyclic existence. It is defined as the continual repetitive cycle of birth and death and refers to the process of cycling through one rebirth after another within the six realms of existence. Samsara only cease by achieving the eternal state of being which is named nirvana (ibid: 45-46).

#### **4.2.5. Pattecasamuppada**

Pattecasamuppada refers to this concept that all things arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions (ibid, 47).

In one of the Buddhist Scriptures entitled 'Lalitavistara', Buddha is named Bodhisattva. This name refers to an old story associated with the day Siddhartha Gautama became Buddha, when he left his house and spent a long time in penance and prayer, overcame the moon and her daughters, passed four stages of understanding and became free of all senses, joy and suffering. Now, he could perceive the process of birth and rebirth, the

cause of all malicious desires and activities, or good deeds which lead them through the heavenly worlds (ibid).

Then he could see all previous lives of whole creatures, and their good or bad destinies. He could also find out who he was, and how he was reborn, how many names he had, and how he lived (ibid: 48).

#### **4.2.6. Nirvana**

Nirvana is the supreme state free from suffering and individual existence, the ultimate goal of all Buddhists. It is also described as the unconditioned mode of being that is free from mind-contaminants such as lust, anger or craving. The attainment of nirvana which is possible through 8 stems of enlightenment can break the endless rebirth cycle of reincarnation. Nirvana can be achieved in this earthly world, by the experience of release from all material phenomena which distance us from freedom, and obtain a sense of great peace and a unique form of awareness and enlightenment. Buddha states that "There is that dimension where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor stasis; neither passing away nor arising: without stance, without foundation, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress." Buddhism aims to help human beings to break free of the wheel of samsara and all endless sufferings (Shariati, 1996: 119).

Nirva means 'extinguish' or 'wane' and nirvana means 'extinguished'. It refers to extinguishing all desires and wills (Ashtiyani, 1998: 408).

#### **4.2.7. Arhat**

An Arhatis is a perfected Buddhist who has passed the eight steps of enlightenment and attained nirvana. Four stages of attainment are described to become an Arhat: (1) the state of the "stream-enterer"—i.e., a convert (Sotapanna)—achieved by overcoming false beliefs and doubts regarding the Buddha, the teachings and the orders, (2) the "once-returner"

(Sakadagamin), who will be reborn only once in this realm, a state attained by diminishing lust, hatred, and illusion, (3) the “nonreturner” (anagamin), who, after death, will be reborn in a higher heaven, where he will become an Arhat, a state attained by overcoming sensuous desire and ill will, in addition to the attainments of the first two stages, and (4) the Arhat.

## 5. Buddhism in Sohrab Sepehri's Thoughts

If we want to investigate the effect of Buddhism on Sohrab Sepehri's thoughts, we need to search it through his poetry.

He published his first collection of poems named ‘the death of color’ in 1951, when he was 23 years old. This collection contains the following poems: in the pitch black of night, smoke is rising, dawn, the riddle bird, a light at the heart of night, mirage, towards sunset, sorrowful sadness, ruin, one who revives, despondent, despondent, silent valley, wall, the death of color, ... (Siahpoush, 1995: 12).

The concepts of sorrow and depression can be easily noticed in Sohrab Sepehri's poetry and even the names of the poems, but they cannot be comprehended simply. For instance, in the poem ‘in the pitch black of night’, the poet says,

For a long time now, in this loneliness  
The color of silence sits upon my lips.  
A distance cry calls me,  
But my feet are in the pitch black of night (Sepehri, 2007: 11-12).

It is alleged that the poet is aware of the earthly obstacles which prevent him from flying and make him suffer. Such a suffering is also referred to in Buddhism, and young Sohrab tries to escape this suffering in ‘the riddle bird’, although this poem seems to be inspired by one of Nima's poems. In this poem, Sohrab speaks about a mystery which has been actuating him for a long time.

For ever so long, on a branch of this willow  
Sits a bird, the color of a riddle.

No way out, though the bird is in full song,  
Its silent form a telling voice.  
The seconds pass before his wakeful eyes (ibid: 20-21).

The poet demonstrates that this issue is of great importance for him, so he searches during the days and ponders during the nights. This notion can be seen in the poem ‘a light at the heart of night’.

Fire is alight at the heart of night  
And beyond its smoke,  
A scene of distant desolation (ibid: 23-24).  
Then, he mentions the path he has to pass in the poem ‘mirage’.  
The sun, and the desert so vast!  
No grass, no trees here seen (ibid: 25-26).  
Two years after publishing his first book, he published ‘the life of dreams’ in 1953.  
In a coffin at my window  
The body of the orient flutters,  
The west gives up the ghost and dies.  
The orange-hued plant of the sun  
Grows slowly in the swamp of my room (ibid: 78).

In the above mentioned lines, it is overtly clear that the poet started a religious journey.

In the poem ‘reward’, he says that  
My country is somewhere beyond the deserts (ibid: 99).

Then he discuss his mystery in another poem named ‘a garden in the voice’  
I was alone in a garden, and a sun was shining, colorless and weightless  
Did I myself come to this garden?  
Or the garden surrounded me? (ibid: 107-108)

In the poem ‘the legend bird’, his journey starts in a temple.

A temple was revived under his glance  
He turned  
And entered the temple  
A colorless light filled the area (ibid: 113).

And then, in the poem 'unanswered' he says,  
In the endless darkness  
A door grew in the light of my expectance (ibid: 127).

Having composed these poems, Sohrab Sepehri travels to India. It can be assumed that there is a goal in this travel. When he returned from India, he published the collection of 'burden of the sun'.

In the wakefulness of the moments  
My body slid beside the roaring creek  
A brilliant bird fell down  
And removed my baffled smile and jumped  
A shining tree  
Swallowed my body into his black roots (ibid: 133-134).

This collection is named 'burden of the sun' which can refer to the poet's travel to India. Sohrab went to India in the hope that he could find the sun, but he did not achieve his goal and was not successful. Having lost his hope, he says in the poem 'resonance' that

I am shaking on the frightening edge of a leave  
Give me your roots (ibid: 135).

In 'Shasousa', Sohrab says,  
I am sitting alone, in soil  
I have lost my zenith  
I fear from the next moment and the open window to my feelings (ibid: 138-139).

Sohrab composed this poem exactly after travelling to India. Buddhist beliefs are seen in the poem 'the mirror flower'.

Doors of awakening were open  
The moment of panic fell in the thresholds  
The doubtful shadow of magic night was shattered  
My dream captured the light (ibid: 150).

Now, Sohrab has been pacified by a new calmness and belief which can be observed in the poem 'dark fruit'.

He came to the garden, brightly  
His shadow was disappearing  
The intoxicated branch was bending against him  
He was beyond this world  
The garden was full of a green gush  
But he was greener (ibid: 181).  
He sees his fruit ripened in the 'morning reapers'.  
The morning reapers are coming along the road  
They saw my ripe fruit in their dreams (ibid: 185).

Sohrab explains his journey in the poem 'come nearer'.

I saw you among the boundaries of time  
I saw you, inexistency filled me  
I am fond of death, but beside you I am a watered lily  
My friend is a frightening existence  
Erode the mossy rock of my soul (ibid: 195).

Sohrab Sepehri escapes the world of suffering in this poem. He, like Buddha, sees this world the source of suffering and fear. He published the collection of 'east of grief' in 1961 which is consisting of mysterious poems drastically affected by Buddhism and named as follows: Hay, doubt, no to stone, and, Na, my fervour, Bodhi, something happened, until, till the flower of naught, ...

## 6. Loneliness

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Human beings' life is constantly accompanied with loneliness. When we are born, we are alone; when we die, we are also alone. We are alone when passing the journey of birth to death. Mystics, poets, philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists have defined loneliness variously. It has been reflected in literature in different ways. The present study aims to demonstrate loneliness in Sohrab Sepehri's poetry.

## **Data Analysis**

### **7. Solitude in Sohrab Sepehri's Poetry**

Loneliness, better to say solitude, in Sohrab Sepehri's poetry can be affected by Buddhist rather than Islamic beliefs. Kliashitorina (1927: 108) stated that mystical poems by Sohrab Sepehri are considerably influenced by Buddhism.

Emad (1998: 66) believed that Sepehri had subtle mind and feelings. He achieved this notion of world through mystical inspirations and artistic reflections which can be rooted in Eastern Buddhism that is one of the strongest motifs of Sepehri's poetry.

Regardless of disagreements over Buddhist beliefs existing in Sohrab Sepehri's poetry, it can be said that solitude refers to a pure and spiritual loneliness in his poetry.

It is a clean solitary room

How simple its dimensions are to ponder (Sepehri, 2007: 310).

Sohrab Sepehri could probably obtain such solitude as a result of being familiar with Buddhist teachings, since Buddha had also taken pleasure in living in solitude. However, there are two types of solitude in Buddhism: the first one is better to be named loneliness which is a kind of masochism which a human being cannot escape from; the second one refers to Buddha and Sohrab Sepehri's solitude which can help human beings to break free of all sufferings.

How well I remember

The sentence that entered the summer resort of my mind:  
Be wide and lonely and humble and firm! (ibid: 319)

Shamisa (2003: 182-183) cited an allusion to Buddhism in Sohrab Sepehri's poetry by the sentence "let the seeker travel alone as a Rhino".

The effect of this sentence can be noticed in Sohrab Sepehri's poem 'pilgrim'.  
And O all olive trees of Palestinian soil  
Address me the density of your shadow  
To this lonely pilgrim who is returning for excursion at Mount Tour (Sepehri, 2007: 321).

The pilgrim again talks about his loneliness:  
The pilgrim's glance fell over the table  
"What pretty apples!  
Life thirsts for solitude." (ibid: 306)

The poem 'pilgrim' represents Sepehri's philosophical attitude towards life. He believes that human beings flourish in solitude (Shamisa, 2003: 145-146). Sohrab Sepehri defines love in accordance with solitude:

And love  
Means journey to the illumination of solitary avoidance of objects (Sepehri, 2007: 308).

Carry me to the solitude of the dimensions of life and show me  
The soft presence of naught (ibid: 328).

'Solitude of the dimensions of life' can be a representation of all life and existence for Sohrab Sepehri. He wants to achieve 'the truth' by this solitude.

Sohrab speaks about solitude in his famous poem 'sound of the footsteps of water'. He allows solitude to surround him, to sing and to write.

Let's allow solitude to sing a song

To write something  
To go to the street (ibid: 297)

In this poem, Sohrab experiences everything to obtain solitude:

I went and went up to the woman  
To the lamp of pleasure  
To the silence of desire  
To the loud voice of loneliness  
....  
I saw a train transporting the seeds of water lily and the song of canary  
And an airplane whose windowpane at that elevated height  
Displayed dust  
The hoopoe's crest  
Spots on the butterfly's wing  
A frog's reflection in the pond  
And the passage of a fly in the alley of solitude  
...  
Love was visible, wave were visible  
...  
The wet side of life  
East of human inherent sorrow  
The season of idling in the alley of woman  
Scent of solitude in the alley of seasons  
...  
The battle of a hole with the pleasing light  
The battle of a stair against the long leg of sun  
The battle of solitude with a song (ibid: 279-282).

Sohrab Sepehri can entirely comprehend solitude and perceive the passage of a fly in the alley of solitude, the battle of solitude with a song, or the clear sound of opening and closing windows of solitude. He can touch the moon. Literally put, he lives the solitude.

Sohrab Sepehri mentions solitude in another famous poem named 'address'.

Where is the friend's house,  
Asked the horseman at daybreak.  
...  
Just before the tree  
There's a lane greener than God's green sleep  
in which love looks as blue as the feathers of truth.  
Go all the way to the end of the lane,  
Which will lead you to the back of Puberty  
Then turn toward the flower of solitude ... (ibid: 358-359)

The horseman who asked the friend's house's address is in fact the alone traveller, Sohrab himself. The poet who went everywhere in 'sounds of the footsteps of water' to find solitude; who travelled everywhere in 'pilgrim' to find the truth.

In the poem 'light, flowers, water, and I', he says that all human beings, creatures, and objects have been separated from their origin, like when someone pulls out a tuft of grass and the poet dies. He can see his way in the dark, and he is a lantern. He is all light and sands, trees and foliage, road, bridge, river, waves and even reflection of a leaf in water (Monzavi, 1975: 13). In the last line of the poem, this solitude is no more pathetic, he has been unified with the world.

## Conclusion

Sohrab Sepehri repeatedly used the word 'solitude' in his poetry which shows his attitude towards life. Not only does this concept demonstrate the individual dimension of his personality, but it reflects his realistic and humanistic viewpoint.

Considering Buddhist teachings, it can be noticed that solitude is of great importance in Buddhism. Regarding the fact that solitude is one of important motifs of Sepehri's poetry, this conclusion may be drawn that he accepted Buddhist beliefs and passed their steps toward enlightenment and became an Arhat. In this stage, he feels free from all earthly attachments, and can take pleasure in seeing other people's happiness, or get upset, when they are sad.

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