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**The Idea of Sadness.  
The Richness of Persian Experiences and Expressions**

**Abstract**

One of the most important notions permeating the culture of Iran is the idea of sadness. It is testified by the fact that, among other things, the idea of sorrow is ever-present in Iranians' everyday life, where it manifests itself in the propensity for tears, nostalgia, longing and succumbing to overwhelming emotion (also in the social and political sphere). Iranians themselves knowingly admit that sadness is part and parcel of the Iranian identity and they wonder why it is so. To answer that question, one should start with tracing the manifestations of sadness in different areas of the culture. In this paper, I shall attempt to identify the spheres of the Persian culture (language, religious rituals, literature, art and behaviour of Iranian people) where sorrow manifests itself in various guise, and I will strive demonstrate the richness of Persian experiences and expressions of sadness in Iranian culture. Persian literature represents the main source material used in the paper.

**Keywords:** Iran, sadness, Persian literature, Persian culture, emotions

The studies on the idea of *shahadat*, martyrdom that I was conducting for a few years<sup>1</sup> uncovered another intriguing research problem. I directed my attention towards the idea of sadness and its pervasive presence in Persian culture. Idea of sorrow is ever-present in Iranians' everyday life, where it manifests itself in the propensity for tears, nostalgia, longing and succumbing to overwhelming emotion (also in the social and

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<sup>1</sup> See: Sylwia Surdykowska, *Martyrdom and Ecstasy. Emotion Training in Iranian Culture*, Cambridge Scholar Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2012.

political sphere). Iranians themselves knowingly admit that sadness is part and parcel of the Iranian identity and they wonder why it is so. A renowned contemporary Iranian philosopher, Abdulkarim Soroush, calls sadness Iranians' national tendency, *gerayesh-e melli*.<sup>2</sup> He remarks that in no other society is there such a strong tendency towards sadness and grief, as it is the case in Iran. "I don't know a more tearful nation than Iranians. I have travelled to many countries, in many I have spent a lot of time. Neither in Muslim or non-Muslim countries is there such great tendency to sorrow and tears as in Iran. (...) In other societies the tendency to grieve is much less noticeable. One should find out why it is the case."<sup>3</sup>

To answer the question put forward by Soroush: why sorrow takes such prominent place in the Persian culture, one should start with examining the manifestations of sadness in different areas of the culture.

In this article I will attempt to point to the spheres of the Persian culture where sadness manifests itself and show the richness of Persian experiences and expressions of sadness in Iranian culture.

The significance of sadness in the Persian culture is reflected, for instance, in the Persian language, which contains very rich vocabulary connected with sadness and its various types. The analysis of Persian poetry and modern Persian language allowed me to isolate a few main words signifying sorrow, which are used both in the classical literature of Iran and contemporary Persian language. One of the most important terms to describe sadness is the word *andu(o)h*. It should be given particular attention due to its Middle Persian roots (from 3<sup>rd</sup> c. BC to 7<sup>th</sup> c. AD). It is known that this term appeared in the Pahlavi language in the form *andoh/handoh*, meaning *sorrow* (according to the transcription provided by David N. MacKenzie – '*ndwh*').<sup>4</sup> The remaining words signifying sadness are mostly of Arabic descent. And here, according to the frequency of usage, the first to be considered should be the word *gham(m)* (plur. *ghomum*), stemming from the Arabic root *gh-m-m*. It can be rendered in English by words such as *sadness*, *worry*, *trouble*, and contrasted with the word *sorur*, *shadi*, that is, *happiness*. This word constitutes a morphological stem creating, together with its various formants, many derivations semantically connected to sadness. No other word signifying sorrow in Arabic has created such a rich family of cognates. To provide an example, the dictionary *Loghatname-ye Dehkhada* gives more than 40 derivatives from the noun *gham* (nouns, adjectives, additionally there are also verbs).<sup>5</sup> Arabic borrowings *khozn* and *ghosse* are other words that frequently appear in Persian literature and contemporary Persian language. These words have a lot of synonyms. There are terms such as Persian *gereftegi-ye del*, *andohmandi*, *ghamgini*, *ghamnaki*. Semantically speaking, all these terms denote sadness.

<sup>2</sup> Abdulkarim Soroush, *A'ine shahryari va dindari*, vol. 2, Moassese-ye Farhangi-ye Serat, Tehran 1379, p. 308.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 309.

<sup>4</sup> David Neil MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, London 1986.

<sup>5</sup> For example: *ghamsuz* – somebody or something that spoils sadness, *ghamangiz* or *ghamavar* – that which brings sorrow / saddening, *ghamkhor* – one who experienced sadness, one who shares the feeling of sadness with the other person, and other.

One can assume that there were many more in the past. The evidence may lie in the whole Persian literature, which treasures a host of words connected with sadness. Most of them are obsolete Arabic terms that are absent from contemporary vernacular or that are sparingly used in the meaning of sadness. There are terms such as *karb*, *timar*, *gorm*, *kamad*, *shajan*, *khaduk*, *fazam*, *zalat*,<sup>6</sup> to name but a few. Attention should be brought to the Old Persian word *na(e)zhandi*<sup>7</sup>, today mostly used in poetry and modern Persian in the word *ravannazhandi* signifying neurosis. At the same time, there are words in the modern Persian language that do not signify sadness, but they are semantically close to that feeling. Similarly to other languages, these are words such as mourning – *azadari*, anxiety – *negarani*, *narahati*, depression – *asfardegi*, pain (suffering) – *dard*, *ranj*, worry – *timar*, melancholy – *sauda*.

Persian language contains many other nouns, adjectives and verbs semantically related to the idea of sadness. In majority they are derivatives, formed from the abovementioned nouns: *anduh*, *gham*, *ghosse*. It should be emphasized that the terminology presented here covers only a choice of the most important vocabulary connected to sadness which Persian language has in store. As Maria Składankowa, one of the most accomplished Polish researchers of Persian culture, noticed, “the terminology in the field of emotion in the Persian language is so rich that it is often impossible to find equivalents of those countless expressions denoting diverse subtle emotional states. It is mostly composed of Arabic words. Supposedly, these are Aramaisms for the most part, since studies in this field had been carried out extensively in the Near East as early as the pre-Islamic times, when Aramaic was the international language of science.”<sup>8</sup> One can suspect that there exist subtle differences between particular words expressing different shades of sorrow, and these nuances were recognised and described by poets for centuries. It is corroborated by the definitions of the words given in Persian dictionaries. For example in the dictionary *Loghatname-ye Dehkhada* the word *kamad* is explained, among other things, as *anduh-e sakht* or *hozn-e shadidi* – “intense sadness”. Whereas in the case of the word *karb*, the same dictionary explains it as “breath-taking, stifling sadness” – *anduh-e khafe konande*.

Translation of Persian terms relating to sorrow into other languages may therefore pose difficulties similar to those that were on many occasions described in the studies on the anthropology of emotions, as well as other disciplines dealing with emotions themselves<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> More examples see *Loghatname-ye Dehkhada*, available under the entry *gham*, [www.loghatnameh.org/dehkhodaworddetail-01f19ce79bf545c88867eb4ee6c318f7-fa.html](http://www.loghatnameh.org/dehkhodaworddetail-01f19ce79bf545c88867eb4ee6c318f7-fa.html) [02.06.2013].

<sup>7</sup> See Mohammad Mo'in, *Farhang-e Farsi*, Amir Kabir, Tehran 1382.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Składankowa, *Iran – paradygmaty wyobraźni (II)*, “Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia” 1993, No. 7, pp. 38–39.

<sup>9</sup> Today, emotions have increasingly often drawn the interest of scholars, who ascribe to them an important role in culture. According to Tomasz Maruszewski, the development of emotion studies has presently reached such a pace – pooling efforts of psychologists, anthropologists, physiologists, biologists, sociologists, literature specialists and philosophers – that the emergence of *affective science*, by analogy with *cognitive science*, is being proclaimed by some. Tomasz Maruszewski, foreword to *Zrozumieć emocje* [Polish translation of *Understanding Emotions*] by Keith Oatley, Jennifer M. Jenkins (ed.), PWN, Warszawa 2005, p. XII.

such as sociology, linguistics, psychology, philosophy and other (e.g. Lutz, Wierzbicka, Locke, Leavitt, Sapir, Wittgenstein).<sup>10</sup>

The richness of vocabulary relating to sadness is reflected in the whole Persian literature. It is one of the most important spheres of Persian culture where the notion of sorrow becomes manifested so clearly. At the same time, it is also one of the most significant sources of knowledge about the culture of Iran, including the concept of sadness. Studies on Persian literature enable us to establish that as early as in 9<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of sadness and its experience was a hugely important theme in many poetical works.<sup>11</sup> Classical Persian literature, national epic *Shahnameh*, Shiite hagiographic literature, and contemporary prose and poetry works are relevant here. A significant deal about this subject can be found in all genres of the Persian poetry: *rubaiyat*, *qasideh*, *ghazal*, *masnavi*, elegy and other. Among authors writing about sadness one can find many ancient and modern poets. In the former group there are the greatest masters of classical Persian literature (10<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> c.), such as Rudaki (9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> c.), Ferdousi (10<sup>th</sup> c.), Shahid Balkhi (10<sup>th</sup> c.), Abulsaid Abulkheyr (11<sup>th</sup> c.), mystics Baba Taher (11<sup>th</sup> c.), Sana'i (11<sup>th</sup> c.), Naser Khosrow (11<sup>th</sup> c.), Omar Khayyam (12<sup>th</sup> c.), Attar from Nishapur (12<sup>th</sup> c.), Moulana Jalaluddin Rumi (12<sup>th</sup> c.), Sa'di (13<sup>th</sup> c.) Hafez (14<sup>th</sup> c.), Jami (15<sup>th</sup> c.). There are also representatives of the Shiite literature of mourning such as Hoseyn Va'ez Kashefi or Muhtasham from Kashan and many other less known poets. After the end of the classical period, poets continued to explore the theme of sadness in their works. The works of Sa'eb Tabrizi (17<sup>th</sup> c.), Bidel Dehlavi (17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> c.), Rahi Mo'ayyeri (20<sup>th</sup> c.) or Farugh Farughzad (20<sup>th</sup> c.) all testify to that. One cannot forget here about the contemporary Shiite elegiac literature from the times of war between Iraq and Iran.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, we can see that since the dawn of time, authors of Persian literature and Iranian thinkers have noticed the presence of sadness. They underlined that it is an inherent part of life. Probably because of that the world in Persian poetry is very often perceived

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<sup>10</sup> See: Anna Wierzbicka, *Understanding Cultures through Their Key Words, English, Russian, Polish, German, and Japanese*, Oxford University Press, New York 1997, p. 4; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell Ltd., Oxford 1986. John Locke, *An essay concerning human understanding*, A.C. Eraser. (ed.), Oxford, Clarendon 1959 [1690]; Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality*, David Mandelbaum (ed.), Berkeley 1949; John Leavitt, *Meaning and Feeling In the Anthropology of Emotions*, "American Ethnologist", vol. 23, no. 3 (1996), pp. 514–539; Catherine A. Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Language and the politics of Emotion*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2008.

<sup>11</sup> It does not mean that examples of joyful pieces cannot be found in Persian literature at all. In Soroush's view, writing of Hafez are a good example of joyful artistic works (although a lot of pieces on sadness can be found in his achievements too). Cf. Soroush, *Aine shahryari va dindari*, p. 309.

<sup>12</sup> Such great interest in sadness on the part of poets does not mean that all of them without exception have only pieces dealing with sorrow among their works. Persian literature does not lack examples of joyful works. Some poets were even disinclined to write about sadness. There were not many of them, however. Especially two 11<sup>th</sup> c. poets connected with the court of Sultan Mahmud from Ghazni belong to that group. One of them is Farrukhi Sistani, the other, Abu Najm Ahmad ibn Ghaus Manuchehri Damghani. The former wrote lyrics full of joy. Sorrow is a rare theme in his works, we can find it for instance in a famous elegy, *marsiye* on the death of Sultan Mahmud from Ghazni. Manuchehri also wrote about sadness rather sparingly. His works are full of joy of life, particularly his *musammats*. Sadness appears in a few *qasideh* and elegies.

as full of sorrow. It is reflected in poetic language, in which the world is described as *ghamkhaneh*, *ghamsara*, *ghamkadeh*, *ghamabad*, *manzel-e gham*, *beyt-e khozn* literally, the house of sorrow, place full of sorrow. It is the house overcome with grief or other place full of sorrow. In poetry, this metaphor has to be construed as world that is filled with sadness or as the heart of man consumed by sorrow.<sup>13</sup> The metaphor *house of grief* was used in works as early as 9<sup>th</sup> c. by the first great classic of Persian literature Abu Abdullah Jafar ibn Mohammad Rudaki. In rubaiyat 22, Rudaki portrays the world as a house of sorrow, *manzel-e gham*, where man is forced to live.

*Dar manzele gham fekonde mafrash maim  
vaz ab-e do cheshm, del-e por atash maim.*<sup>14</sup>

“In the house of sorrow (the world) like a carpet cast upon the floor we are  
Our heart fills the tears in our eyes with the fire of sadness.”<sup>15</sup>

Rudaki compares the world to a house of sorrow, and human fate to a carpet thrown onto the floor. Such destiny brings tears to eyes and kindles fire in man’s heart, fire that in Persian poetry stands for pain and suffering.

Similar view of the world can be seen in the works of one of the first Iranian mystics, Abulsaid Abulkhayr, who lived at the turn of 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century. In rubaiyat 498, he states that the life of man is filled with sorrow and loneliness.

*Aftadeh manam be gushe-je beyt-e khozn.*<sup>16</sup>

“I fell into the part of world filled with sorrow (house of sorrow).”

The ubiquity of sadness in the world is especially emphasised by Shahid Balkhi (10<sup>th</sup> c.), who stresses that there is so much sorrow in the world that if it were to manifest itself as smoke, the whole world would be enveloped in it. Sadness can be associated here with something dark, making life difficult.

*Agar gham ra chu atash dud budi  
jahan tarik budi javedaneh.*<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See Hasan Anvari, *Farhang-e fesharde-ye sokhan*, Sokhan, Tehran 1382, p. 1609.

<sup>14</sup> *Asar-e Abuabdollah Ja’far ben Mohammad Rudaki*, rubaiyat 22, Nashriyat-e Doulati-ye Tajikistan, Dushanbe 1957, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Translation of poetry into English language in this article does not aspire to artistic work, its purpose being only to give the sense of the original.

<sup>16</sup> Abulsaid Abulkheyir, rubaiyat 498, <http://ganjoor.net/abusaeed/robaee-aa/sh497/> [10.10.2013].

<sup>17</sup> Shahid Balkhi, quoted after *Loghatname-ye Dehkhada*, available under the entry *gham*, [www.loghatnaameh.org](http://www.loghatnaameh.org) [17.03.2013].

“If sorrow were to come disguised as smoke  
darkness would veil the world forever.”

Poets have also been interested in the reasons of sadness. The most common causes that we can read about in poetry are unhappy love and yearning for a beloved person, also God, i.e., the sorrows of separation. Due to the great number of synonyms in the Persian language, the metaphor has a few versions. For example, *hoz-n-e farogh*, *anduh-e faragh* or *gham-e hejrat* – house of sorrow. Bereavement and existential sadness are another two causes of sorrow. We can find the above-mentioned reasons of sadness in the works of most poets who dealt with the issue. All of them took interest in the nature of sadness. Many authors felt that it can be a good feeling and verses of love poems arguably prove that. The particular kind of nostalgia brought on by love is relevant here. Many would agree that there is something pleasant in this kind of sadness, something that an individual enjoys feeling. Rudaki, among other, hints at such an experience. In the second rubaiyat he writes about sadness and suffering because of being separated from the beloved person, feelings that arouse hope for joy and fulfilment.

*Ba an ke delam az gham-e hejrat khun ast  
shadi be gham-e tou'am ze gham afzunast  
andisheh konam har shab va guyam: yarab  
hejranash chenin ast, vesalash chunast?*<sup>18</sup>

“Although my heart bleeds from the woes of our separation  
Joy of sorrow you have brought upon me filled with sadness  
Every night I think and say: Oh Lord!  
If this be the separation, what joy awaits at our reunion?”

This captivating nature of sadness is also reflected in the Persian expression *gham-e-shirin*, which literally means *sweet sorrow*. It is a sorrow that conveys something pleasant. Some poets describe the nature of sadness describing it as a companion. Baba Taher (d. 1055) in rubaiyat 92 observes that sadness brought about by love is like a best friend who never leaves an individual, whom one can let in on one's secrets, who does not allow one to forget about happiness.

*Ghamam gham bi va hamraze delam gham  
ghamam hamsokhbat va hamraz va hamdam  
ghamat mahele ke mu tanha neshinam  
mariza barekallah marhaba gham.*<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Rudaki, *Asar-e Abuabdollah Ja'far ben Mohammad Rudaki*, rubaiyat 2, p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> Baba Taher, *Dobeytiha*, rubaiyat 92, <http://ganjoor.net/babataher/2beytiha/sh302/> [27.06.2013].

“My sadness is my sorrow and counsellor of my heart  
 My sadness is my companion, confidant, the trusted one  
 The sadness you have brought upon me does not let me stay alone  
 My sorrow, thank you. My sorrow, welcome.”

Analysis of many works proves that the sorrow of love is a very much anticipated state. Some poets go as far as to emphasize that the experience of sadness is the herald of happiness. In this way, not only do they make a point that sadness is a precondition of joy, but they also highlight its fleeting nature. They remind that sorrow does not last forever, and that it is followed by happiness. The couplet by Sana’i seems to testify to that.

*Manegar in hale gham o andishe kaz ruye kherad  
 shadi-ye sad sale zayad madare yek ruze gham.*<sup>20</sup>

“Do not pay attention to sorrow or worry that comes from the mind  
 One day of sadness shall bear a hundred years of joy.”

Although poets underline the value of sadness, at the same time, they perceive it as a difficult and painful feeling. Sadness in Persian poetry has been repeatedly described as intense suffering, a severe force that is difficult to endure. This kind of sadness is very often compared to a huge mountain, hard, austere and dangerous rock. It is testified by Baba Taher, among other poets, who in rubaiyat 302 talks about sorrow that bears hard with its burden and is like a tremendous rock in the heart of man.

*Ghadam daim zebare ghosse kham bi  
 chu mu mehnatkeshi dar dahr kam bi  
 mu hargez az gham azadi nadiram  
 del bi talee mu kuh-e gham bi.*<sup>21</sup>

“Its figure ever stooped by sorrow  
 Suffering like me, the world has seen but a few  
 I have never been free from sadness  
 Sorrow dwells for ever like a mountain in my heart.”

Many poets share the view that suffering caused by sadness has high value. It can be a force that develops and perfects a human being. In numerous works, authors emphasise that the experience of pain allows one to see the depth and value of life, to understand what is really important and what is not. It lets people experience and understand the

<sup>20</sup> Sana’i, *Divan-e asha’r, Ghasayed va ghethe’at, shamare-ye 133*, <http://ganjoor.net/sanaee/divans/ghgh/sh133/> [17.10.2013].

<sup>21</sup> Baba Taher, *Dobeytiha, shomare-ye 302*, <http://ganjoor.net/babataher/2beytiha/sh302/> [19.10.2013].

world. Such an approach to sadness can be found in Nezami's poetry, who claims that in certain situations the experience of pain improves man. It happens so, for instance, when an individual has to struggle with an enemy who is wise. Nezami believes that sadness brought on by the enmity of a wise man is better than having a stupid and inexperienced friend. Nezami says:

*Doshmane dana ke ghamejan bovad  
behtar az an dust ke nadan bovad.*<sup>22</sup>

“An intelligent enemy, who arouses sadness of my soul  
Is better than a friend who is stupid.”

Regardless of varying approaches to sadness, appreciated by some, unwelcome by others, it has been an important subject of study among Iranian poets. They acknowledge its existence and try to fathom its nature and render its character. Fragments given here are only a few examples of ambiguity of the notion of sadness which is expressed in Persian poetry.

Literature is not the only area of the culture of Iran soaked with sadness. One has to remember that Shi'ism became the national religion only in 16<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of the Safavid dynasty (1501–1731). However, Iranians sympathised with Shi'ism much earlier. Almost from its early beginnings, Shi'ism was characterised by suffering and a well-developed cult of martyrdom. The source of these ideas is rooted in the history of Shi'ism and in the struggle for the right of succession after prophet Muhammad. After his death, some followers supported hereditary rule and chose Ali as his successor. They called him *imam*, and for themselves chose the name *shi'a*, which stands for 'party' or 'faction'. Their opposition, supporting democratic rule, were called the people of tradition, *ahl as-sunna*, and conferred the title to Muhammad's right hand, Abu Bakr. It was him that the role of Muhammad's successor fell to in 632, which led to the split in Islam and centuries of struggle for power that led to the death of all Shiite imams. That is why, the ideas of suffering and martyrdom, and as a consequence mourning, sadness and longing acquired special significance for Shiites.

One of the most important sources to trace the idea of sadness in Iranian culture is religious Shiite literature describing martyrdom. First works on that topic sprang to life as early as in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of the first poets who dealt with the subject was Qavami from Rey, author of *Divan* containing poems about virtues of imams. The Shiite literature flourished in the period of Safavids rule, when Shi'ism became the official creed in the country.<sup>23</sup> Not infrequently, these works contributed to the development of religious rituals, during which the main role is attributed to expressing grief and sorrow,

<sup>22</sup> Nezami, *Khamseh, Kheradnameh*, bakhsh-e 33, *Jahangardi-ye Eskandar ba d'avi-ye peyghambar*, <http://ganjoor.net/nezami/5ganj/kheradname/sh33/> [19.09.2013].

<sup>23</sup> More on this topic in my article *Idea męstwa w literaturze religijnej okresu safawidzkiego*, in: Cezary Galewicz, Jadwiga Pstrusińska. (ed.), *Miscellanea Euroasiatica Cracoviensia*, pp. 147–161.

feelings treated by Shiites as a kind of religious activity. Expressing these feelings is important in almost all rituals, particularly Shiite rituals.

The most important Shiite rituals take place in the Muslim month of Moharram. They commemorate the tragic death of the third Shiite imam, Hoseyn, and his companions in the battle of Karbala that took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Moharram 680. In the slaughter that ensued, Imam Hoseyn was killed together with his companions. According to the Shiite tradition, Hoseyn knew that he was about to suffer a defeat in military struggle with his enemy, Yazid. Still, he did not retreat and drew his sword against the larger in numbers armies of the enemy.<sup>24</sup> This deed is for Shiites a sign of courage and unsurpassed bravery, and they consider Imam Hoseyn the paragon of martyrdom. Expressing grief and sorrow accompanied Shiites in the first Moharram celebrations, which probably took place in Baghdad in the 10<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Mu'izz ad-Dawla (945–967), monarch from the Buiyd dynasty (949–1055). Today, the ceremonies commemorating the events at Karbala consist of many rituals whose task is to invoke in the faithful sincere grief and sadness at Imam Hoseyn's sacrifice. Throughout the whole month, a range of rituals devoted to the remembrance of the dead and mourning, *azadari*, take place. Sadness manifests here chiefly as grief and mourning because of the death of Shiite imams, who are symbols of struggle for good and justice. Passion plays *ta'ziyeh*, lit. compassion, lamenting, provide a good example here. They are a kind of religious theatre. During the plays, fragments of the battle of Karbala and motifs from life and scenes from death of imams and their families are staged. It is mostly about portraying their suffering and readiness to sacrifice in such a way that the audience could share the experience of the characters, commiserate with them in their tragedy and mourn them.

Other ritual called *rouzehkani* consists in reciting poems about martyrs and suffering of their families. Flagellants' processions taking place in the houses of followers and in mosques, as well as other rituals, also serve to invoke sadness. All of them purport to arouse in the participants a feeling of sadness, but also the accompanying feelings of grief, repentance and identification with martyrs. It is all about identifying oneself with the situation of the Shiite heroes. Sharing their experience and feeling the sadness allows contemporary Iranians to appreciate their own life and to deal better with the day-to-day worries, it teaches how to overcome difficulties, endure suffering and pain. Certainly, that is why contemporary Shiite scholars call the month of Moharram the school of life.<sup>25</sup>

What testifies to the power of sadness in the country is a fact that in the history of Iran sorrow has repeatedly played an important part in the political sphere. The feelings of grief and sorrow in full swing were manifested during the revolution of 1979 in a response to arrests and demonstrations thwarted by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Bloodily suppressed demonstrations came to be the reason for successive revolts. In accordance with the Shiite tradition, laments were sung over the persons killed during

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<sup>24</sup> Jean Calmard, *Hosayn b. 'Ali ii*. In *Popular Shi'ism*, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. XII, New York 2004, pp. 498–502.

<sup>25</sup> I write about it in *Martyrdom and Ecstasy*.

demonstrations after forty days. Each time, many other people got killed, and forty days later, a still larger crowd filled up the streets. In 1978, every forty days ever greater demonstrations held in commemoration of those who had been killed moved down the streets of the Iranian towns. The notion of sadness, inextricably related to the Shiite tradition, was once again brought to life, and its manifestation in the form of the cult of Imam Hoseyn and his tragic death became a model of life to be emulated. In this way, grief and sadness gained a new meaning for the families that lost their close relatives – something that was exploited for political reasons by the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Once again the idea of sadness revealed its power during the time of war with Iraq. At the time, the idea of sadness and the related suffering were harnessed in the political propaganda. The feeling of imminent threat and clever rethorics of the Iranian leaders referring to the idea of martyrdom influenced the emotions of Iranians, arousing feelings connected with sadness, mourning, sacrifice etc., and likewise induced people to participate in the war with Iraq.<sup>26</sup>

Sadness is present in many other fields of Persian culture. The presence of sadness is also visible in art. Nostalgia features in a good deal of contemporary Persian pieces of music. Most of them are full of melancholy and longing. Similarly, a lot of film works in the Iranian cinema tell stories of sad, difficult and painful experiences. One could venture to say that a note of sadness could even be noticed in Iranian painting. To provide an example it is worth referring to a contemporary Persian artist, Mahmoud Farshchian.<sup>27</sup> His painting is characterised by a peculiar kind of nostalgia expressed in sweeping, oblong strokes and pastel colours. This delicate and gentle line can also be identified in classical Persian miniatures and calligraphy. Particular feelings and emotional states are rendered here with the use of colours. Depending on the context, symbolic meaning ascribed to a particular colour can sometimes change. Sadness is signified by blue colour, which can also be the symbol of power, truth, peace and depression.<sup>28</sup> According to some interpretations, it is integrally related with spirituality and wisdom. Sometimes it is also considered to be a colour of mourning and asceticism, which is why sufis quite often wore dark blue garments.<sup>29</sup> Some interesting information about colours can be found in the works of Abu Reyhan Biruni, a distinguished scholar, who conducted his research in 10<sup>th</sup> century. In his work dedicated to astrology *Ketab al-tafhim*,<sup>30</sup> he ascribes colours to individual celestial bodies and ties them to particular days of the week. He assigns blue

<sup>26</sup> For more see: *ibidem*, p. 145 and further.

<sup>27</sup> Mahmud Farshchian – contemporary Iranian miniature artist born 24/01/1930. Created a unique style of painting. His works have been exhibited in many places in the world, including Poland.

<sup>28</sup> Maryam Ala Amjadi, *Shades of Doubt and Shapes of Hope: Colors in Iranian Culture*, “Tehran Times”, vol. 11374, [www.tehrantimes.com/life-style/95674-shades-of-doubt-and-shapes-of-hope-colors-in-iranian-culture](http://www.tehrantimes.com/life-style/95674-shades-of-doubt-and-shapes-of-hope-colors-in-iranian-culture), [02.06.2013].

<sup>29</sup> For more see: Annemarie Schimmel, *Color Symbolism in Persian Literature*, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. VI, pp. 46–50.

<sup>30</sup> Abu Reyhan Biruni, *Ketab al-tafhim le-awa'el yend'at al-tanjim*, (ed. and tr.) R. Ramsay Wright as *The Book of Instruction in the Elements of the Art of Astrology*, Luzac, London 1934, pp. 240–241; pp. 396–406.

to Mercury and Wednesday. It also proves to be a recurring symbolic scheme in Persian literature. Miniatures that adorned prominent works of Persian literature testify to that. Particularly *Haft peykar* by Nizami Ganjavi and *Hasht behesht* by Amir Khosrow are relevant here. Colour scheme of garments and elements of architecture in miniatures was matched to days of the week and their patron planets.<sup>31</sup> No wonder that blue (together with its hues) is one of the most dominating colours in Iranian art. It is present in architecture, handicraft, miniatures, carpet making, jeweller's craft and ceramics.<sup>32</sup>

Sadness finds its place in many areas of Persian culture. Music, literature, religious rituals, cinema continuously evoke sadness felt over the course of hundreds of years. In this way, Iranians have continued to experience sadness in its different dimensions and facets. They feel sorrow not only because of their personal circumstances. Iranians experience all the sorrows accumulated and felt by generations of ancestors, sadness that is the experience of the Iranian society, part of the emotional heritage of their country.

The recurrence of the experience of sadness, reliving it again, can have fundamental importance in the process of Iranians' education, shaping their outlook on life. One can say that this ability to feel is understood in the culture of Iran as a formative tool that shapes an individual, his or her wisdom of experience, appropriate social relations, ability to keep distance to life's adversities and accept life's unpredictability. The experience of sadness is the opposite of joy, therefore, in the view of Iranians, enables one to learn and appreciate what happiness is about. In this context, an interesting fact seem the results of research in the field of anthropology and intercultural psychiatry conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by a team of scholars that consisted of Bayron Good, Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good and Robert Moradi. During the interviews they carried out with Iranian immigrants in the United States, one of them, Mr Tehrani, said: "When you understand sadness, you can understand people better. Right now, Iranian people understand happiness is very good, because they are sad. Now that I am sad, I understand what happiness is."<sup>33</sup>

The analysis of source materials allows one to make a conclusion that sadness in the culture of Iran shapes an individual, his or her approach to good and evil, to another man and his or her experiences. The capability to feel sorrow tells about the value of an individual, his or her identity, determines a person's own self. How important that capacity for sadness is can be corroborated by the fact that sorrowful people are perceived as profound and wise. No wonder that in Iran it is not right for people to laugh out loud. It has been confirmed not only by field work, but also by opinions of Iranians themselves. Tehrani, who has been already quoted here, stated: "(...) We say if people

<sup>31</sup> Cf. E.Y. Yusupov et al. (ed.), *Miniatures and Illuminations of Amir Hosrov Dehlevi's Works*, Fan Publishing House, Tashkent 1983. See Nezami Miniatures 11–12, 14–15, 45–51, 67–73, 75.

<sup>32</sup> Priscilla P. Soucek, *Use and Importance of Color in Persian Art*, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 6, www.iranicaonline.org/articles/color-pers-rang [04.01.2014].

<sup>33</sup> Quoted after Byron Good, Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, Robert Moradi, *The Interpretation of Iranian Depressive Illness and Dysphoric Affect*, in: Arthur Kleinman, Byron Good (ed.), *Culture and Depression. Studies in the Anthropology and Cross-Cultural Psychiatry of Affect and Disorder*, University of California Press, London 1985, p. 397.

have an easy laugh, it is because they don't understand this life doesn't have a point to it. We understand tragedy better. Our history is tragedy- tragedy after tragedy. (...) You have to understand tragedy if you want to socialize with people."<sup>34</sup>

To describe the significance of sadness in the culture of Iran, it may be worth to use a term coined by one of the contemporary social psychologists, Joseph de River, who thinks that in every culture there is a specific *emotional climate*. "This term refers to the dominating mood in a cultural or national group. It affects not only how one feels, but also the perception of what one can or cannot do. For instance, in certain countries in South and Central America a climate of fear pervaded that stemmed from random acts of murder. In such climate, the feeling of mistrust becomes intensified and cooperation ceases to exist. Even the interpretation of everyday objects changes. Red traffic light that is supposed to signify 'stop' can lose its meaning, because when a person stops, he or she can become an easy target."<sup>35</sup>

The term that best describes emotional climate of Iranian culture is precisely sadness and nostalgia. Sorrow shapes Iranians' moral norms, affects the way people should and should not behave. Such conclusions were put forward by the aforementioned Byron Good and Robert Moradi and Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, who write that in Iranian society "sadness is associated with personal depth (*omgh*). A quiet, serious, gentle person is contrasted with one who is noisy and talks too much, who jokes inappropriately and is unmannerly. A sad person is considered a thoughtful person (*motafakker*), who has childishness and playfulness under control. A sense of the tragic in life is associated with depth of the inner self, as opposed to shallowness of the outer self. One who express happiness too readily is often considered to be a simple (*sade*) or socially incompetent person. Indeed, the ability to express sadness appropriately and in a culturally prescribed manner is a mark of social competence as well as personal depth."<sup>36</sup>

This statement seems to hold true even today. What is more, sadness also determines the aesthetic canons. Sad things are often perceived as beautiful. I became convinced about that while travelling around Iran. On numerous occasions, I heard Iranians' opinions that sad things are beautiful. It was very often the case with sad, moving music or fragments of poetry. During my stay in Iran in 2009, I visited one of the Persian music stores, where I asked for some sad music. The assistant appreciated my interest in sadness and was really happy about that. With great eagerness he was trying to find the most nostalgic pieces. Some other time, one of the taxi drivers playing some longing pieces by a famous singer Hoyedeh said: "we Iranians love sad things. Sadness is beautiful."

It does not mean, however, that one should perceive the Iranians solely as sorrowful and suffering individuals, people in whose life there is no space for merriment and fun. Everyone who has visited Iran knows that its citizens – their penchant for nostalgia notwithstanding – can also be full of good sense of humour and joy. It is especially evident

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted after Oatley and Jenkins, *Zrozumieć emocje*, p. 47.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted after Good, et al., *Interpretation of Iranian Depressive Illness*, in: *Culture and Depression*, p. 385.

in the Persian poetry, where ruminations on sadness are accompanied by reflections about joy. To quote the words of Moulana Jalaluddin Rumi: every cry becomes laughter in the end, a human being there in between them is a creature bestowed with God's grace.<sup>37</sup>

Sorrow emerges in the whole Persian culture: in language, religious rituals, literature, art and behaviour of Iranian people. Each of these spheres unveils a different face of sadness, shows its variety and complexity. Such a multidimensional term, present in almost all spheres of Persian culture certainly has a significant impact on shaping Iranians' mental horizon. Hence, many questions arise here. Where the propensity to sadness in Iranian culture comes from is just one of many questions related to the subject. One could ask what are the reasons for Iranian's sorrows and how the idea of sadness has influenced the shaping of the culture of Iran over the centuries: not only patterns of socio-political, religious and individual behaviour (e.g., Good and Good<sup>38</sup>), ways of thinking, spirituality, but also products of culture, for example, art. The key question in the studies of sadness in the culture of Iran, however, relates to the Iranians' own understanding of sadness and what it means to them, how sadness functions in the culture, in its different areas, and what sense Iranians ascribe to it.<sup>39</sup>

To answer these questions as well as other, one needs to carry out further study on the idea of sadness, taking perhaps a broader research perspective comprising studies in anthropology, psychology, linguistics, because, as Mieke Bal claims, "(...) concepts are not fixed. They travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities. As a result, concepts (...) are never unequivocal or understood in a canonical way, but are always fluid in their meaning, and their value and wealth of senses may differ substantially (...)." <sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Akhar-e har geriyeh akhar khandei ast / mard akhar beyn mabarak bandei ast*. Moulana Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi, *Masnavi-ye ma'navi*, 1/819, (ed.) R. Nicolson, Hamayesh, Tehran 1379.

<sup>38</sup> See B. Good, Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, *Ritual, the State, and the Transformation of Emotional Discourse in Iranian Society*, "Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry" 1988, 12, pp. 43–63.

<sup>39</sup> We do not ask how they feel it or is the Iranian sadness the same as Polish, Russian or American one. They touch upon the research attempting to answer the question whether emotions are culturally conditioned and are related to studies in the fields of neurobiology and psychology, something our own studies do not aspire to.

<sup>40</sup> Wojciech Burszta, Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska, foreword to Mieke Bal, *Wędrujące pojęcia w naukach humanistycznych* [Polish translation of: *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*], Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2012, p. 49.