

Iranian Intellectuals and Class Conflict in Akbar Radi's *Melody of a Rainy City*

Ramin Farhadi¹ & Mohammad Amin Mozaheb²

¹M.A. in English Literature, Azad University of Karaj, Iran

² PhD in Applied Linguistics, Department of Foreign Languages, Language Center, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Iran

Corresponding Author: Mohammad Amin Mozaheb, E-mail: mozaheb.ma@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In the plays of Akbar Radi, a prominent contemporary Iranian playwright, the concept of intellectual is of particular importance. Several of his dramas stage the intellectuals facing their internal and external problems, and the way in which they are understood in public. In his major play *Melody of a Rainy City* (2013), Radi represents Gramscian types of intellectuals, that is, traditional and organic, to re-consider them in Iranian context. His play staging the 1940s Iran under the occupation of Anglo-Soviet military forces deals with class warfare in Iranian society which finally resulted in the disappearance of feudalism and the development of bourgeois culture. Therefore, this study, by using social history of Iran and close reading of the text, explores intellectual discourse in Radi's *Melody of a Rainy City*. The most important research finding is that Radi by uniting Gramscian intellectuals along with considering Iranian traditional background, aims to develop a new definition of domestic intellectuals seeking for effective participation in facilitating the development process, truly essential for implementation of modernization programs, in Iranian society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Akbar Radi (1939-2007) is one of the greatest playwrights in the history of Iranian drama. He has to be considered a dramatist whose works revolutionized Iranian stage. Radi begins his theatrical career in the early 1960s in Rasht, an important city in Northern Iran. The main themes of his plays is his exploration of contemporary Iranian society from the perspective of the social and the historical, and how historical events and turning points might influence the process of selfhood formation in his characters (Afshariasl, 2011, p. 336). In this way, he practices a theater of identity whose overall aim is to (re)define Iranian identity, along with careful examination of characters when have to make life-changing decisions. According to Ghaderi (2011), Radi is the most prominent playwright dramatizing the interaction between Iranian people and the contemporary social-historical discourses which are influential in shaping their selves (p. 115).

Radi, moreover, pays close attention to the relationships of individuals with their family in particular, and society in general. In almost all his plays, with regard to historical events, the setting is in

within a family and the representations of its members' relations are dominant. Hi stage, Ghaderi (1983) argues, reflects the social identity which has been developed by the historical awareness of the characters involved in historically important situations (p. 151). Of his typical themes is the historical awareness of individuals as the effect of a major historical transformation in Iranian society, and the way in which intellectuals might have influence in shaping a new understanding of selfhood, society and politics. For instance, in *Tender with Red Rose* (1984), he dramatizes the contrasting opinions of a middle class family about Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979 which resulted in the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy (1925-79). In the play, the father of the family who is a tea merchant supports the idea of revolution because it causes the price increase in some specific items such as tea; thus, his capital is to accumulate quickly. However, his Marxist son opposes the father and favors the establishment of socialist principles in society.

In the same fashion, *Melody of a Rainy City* (2003), as one of Radi's major dramas, stages the dichotomy of feudalism/serfdom after the forced abdication of Reza

Shah in 1941 by the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran as a result of his encouragement of German-Iran economic ties during the Second World War. The play represents an intellectual's return to his hometown – Rasht – and his dilemma of staying in Iran or having his teaching position at the University of Lausanne. The play not only stages the fall of feudalism, but also defines the responsibility of an Iranian intellectual and his role in public in the aftermath of a historical turning point. In this fashion, Gheissari (1998) writes that the absolutist structure of Reza Shah's reign (1925-41) was inspired by any forms of intellectual intervention:

Rules, regulations, and political authority were so closely associated with the person of the ruling sovereign that any change in leadership was bound to result in lawlessness, but at the same time, as the sixteen years of autocratic rule gave way to frequent changes in government, a haphazard, sometimes chaotic, combination of civil liberties ensued, allowing intellectuals to enjoy a period of cultural and political criticism. (p. 61)

This study, therefore, analyzes Akbar Radi's view of Iranian intellectualism and the subversion of feudalism/serfdom binary in *Melody of a Rainy City*. In the play, Radi associates the idea of development and modernization of Iran with the work of intellectuals; as a consequence, based on Antonio Gramsci's classification of intellectuals into traditional and organic, Radi pushes forth the idea that an Iranian intellectual is a synthesis of both kinds of intellectuals Gramsci defined in *Prison Notebooks* (1929-35) which will be studied in the subsequent sections.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1. Intellectual Discourse and Iranian Context

The Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) marks the advent of modern intellectualism in Iran. The Constitution as a democratic movement led to the establishment of parliament in Iran, aimed at modernization of the country and the reconciliation of the two discourses of modernity and tradition in Iran's state of affairs. It also imposed restriction on the power and authority of the monarch. The early intellectuals of the period were graduated from Western academic institutions tried to introduce Enlightenment and rational thinking to the Iranian society, less than a decade after the Dreyfus Affair and the famous article by Emile Zola, *J'Accuse...!* in 1898 which for many is viewed as the early manifesto of intellectualism. At the outset, Iranian people had associated the intellectual

practice with a "commitment to reform" the social-political structures of the nation (Gheissari, 1998, p. 15). However, the abolition of the Parliament in 1908 by Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar (1907-9), the then king of Iran, and the prosecution of Constitutionists demonstrated the confrontation between intellectuals and power authorities.

The 1921 Persian coup d'état resulted in the overthrow of Qajar dynasty and the coronation of Reza Shah later in 1925 as the first Pahlavi monarch. During Reza Shah's reign, the intellectual practice was flourished and secularism is supported by the new State as an opposition to religious conservatism and traditionalism. Overall, Reza Shah's reign was autocratic, and pursued different objectives than those identified with the Constitutional period, although at face value Reza Shah advocated the goals of the Movement. As Mirsepasi (2000) observes, The Shah's disrespect of Iran's religious tradition and propagation of pre-Islamic Aryan myth proved to be very controversial (p. 63), along with the Westernized nature of his project of modernization which sparked protest among the Iranian intellectuals and journalists. The project was secularized, ideological, and above all anti-polyvocal; it virtually excluded subcultural groups. Reza Shah's regime, furthermore, violently clashed with the clergy in the 1930s. Political dissidents of the period were sentenced to imprisonment and banishment, and the freedom of expression was flagrantly violated.

In the aftermath of Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941, Reza Shah was abdicated and the country immediately slid into chaos, disintegration and conflict (Katouzian, 2003, p. 28). It was in this time of troubles that Iranian intellectuals found themselves in a position to intervene in almost every aspect of the social and political affair. Radi, too, as a socialist analyst pays close attention to the role and function of intellectuals in public. In his view, intellectuals may be influential in shaping an effective discourse or strategy aiming at tackling the problems current state of affairs and the union of the mental and the labor to deconstruct master-slave relationship in *Melody of a Rainy City* (Sadeghi, 2011, p. 58).

For Collini (2006, p. 20), intellectuals are active in the field of politics, and this political engagement is a vital part of the definition of intellectualism. The same thing appears true to Iranian intellectuals; the direct involvement in the country's political arena is what

expected from Iranian intellectuals from the second half of the twentieth-century onward. The intelligentsia of the period, as Mirsepassi classifies, involves two main trends of intellectuals, religious and Marxist (2000, p. 68). Among them, Marxist intellectuals were in majority. Many notable Iranian writers and intellectuals, including Akbar Radi, had strong beliefs in the practice of socialist ideas in Iranian society and politics. For this reason, they formed the Communist Tudeh Party of Iran in 1941 – a few days after the abdication of Reza Shah. These intellectuals, the adherents of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, were in seek of restoring order after the abdication, and their party unrivaled in Iranian political scene aimed at promoting development programs throughout the country (Nabavi, 2003, p. 4). Broadly speaking, the Marxist intellectuals made up the majority of intelligentsia in the 1940s and 1950s of Iran. Their core belief was to put forward the ideas of domestic production, commitment and reform. Scalmer (2003) describes leftist intellectuals as the holders of the view that science and organization of social classes are the important factors that intellectuals would offer to the domestic affairs; moreover, for them, it would be not possible for the intellectuals to detach themselves from any social structures to remain impartial (p. 37). Seen as such, the plays of Radi dramatize leftist intellectuals in a context that the characters mount conclusive arguments over the existing problems and the idea of development. By forming union between Gramsci's traditional and organic intellectuals, as well as the emphasis on domestication, Radi associates their labor and practice with the promotion of development in the structures of society. To a larger degree, this can be related to Edward Said's theory of intellectuals, as Hollis (1997) expounds, that they have to be pragmatist and have their roots and backgrounds in local and regional areas of their activities, and hence a kind of domestic intellectual discourse is to form (p. 291).

2.2. The Intellectuals in *Melody of a Rainy City*

Melody of a Rainy City dramatizes the event of two families in the city of Rasht in the aftermath of the abdication and exile of Reza Shah from throne in four acts. The play represents the relationships between two families of Ahang, the feudal and the wealthy, and Shafti, the serf whom have been living in one of Ahang's houses for years. It stages the social interaction of these families and the way in which the system of feudalism is fading away and bourgeoisie is about to emerge. Three characters of the play can be

considered intellectual, though with different ideas and backgrounds: Mahyar, a lawyer and a university lecturer coming back from Lausanne, Sirous, the son of the Shafti's, and Gilan her sister. All these characters have tendency toward socialist ideas, although the case of Mahyar is slightly different, largely due to his European education in Switzerland. Overall, Radi aims to define a new kind of intellectual to Iranian society by blending Gramsci's traditional and organic intellectuals with domesticism which will be discussed in detail.

The play begins by introducing the Ahang family and the homecoming of Mahyar from Lausanne about forty days after the death of his father Sadegh Ahang the wealthy master of the house. Having earned his doctorate in law, Mahyar has been offered a teaching position at the University of Lausanne, and his older brother Bahman is an inspector in the province office of Rasht, and their sister Marie is a school teacher. The mother of the family, Afagh, firmly believes in the lord/serf world living in the same house with her children. On the other hand, the Shafti family are serfs of the Ahang's. They take up residence in the house of Behistun Street entrusted by the late Sadegh Ahang to the Shafti's to live and work for him. The Shafti family has two children, Sirous who is a Marxist intellectual and a political dissenter, and Gilan a schoolmistress and a theatre player. Borrowing from Gramsci (1989), she is a traditional intellectual, with a peasant origin, in a sense that she has been active in affairs related to cultural and educational policies and removal of the existing problems (p. 114).

The main conflict in the play is that Afagh and Bahman are of the same opinion that the Shafti family have to evacuate the house of Behistun which Mahyar has inherited from his father. At face value, it seems the conflict in the play is over the inheritance, yet the major concern which Radi expresses in his drama, as Sedighi (2017) puts it is the disappearance of feudalism and the union of intellectuals, Mahyar and Gilan at the close of the play, to promote development politics in their region (p. 56).

The political events of Iran in the 1940s changed the social structures and relationships of different strata, and the reflection of this radical change can be seen in the beginning of the play that Mirsakineh, the aged housemaid of the Ahang family, pretends to be exhausted and ill, and even groans, when the lady of the house, Ahang, commands her to perform some

tasks. Another example is the quarrel between Sirous and Bahman in the third act of the play about social justice and Bahman's support of Nazism which Sirous chastises him severely: "No sir! Your god is too luxurious. A perfect German god creating by creatures like you" (Radi, 2013, p. 44). Bahman is in support of an elite dictator such as the contemporary Hitler or the early nineteenth-century Napoleon Bonaparte. Radi presents him as a royalist and a feudalist who still tries hard to maintain the old order of lord/serf. What Radi's play stages is the revolt of the slave against the master which the new socio-political situation in Iran has provoked it. Each character in the play is experiencing a change in social roles, and this eventually results in redefining their social roles.

Taking everything into account, classification of intellectuals in the play is three different individuals: Mahyar, Sirous and Gilan. Mahyar as a novice lawyer was a political activist in Switzerland whose critical articles against the devastating World War II and Nazism published in notable French and Swiss press. His intellectual practice is mainly focused on international affairs and peace. On the other hand, Sirous as a leftist intellectual strongly believes in the establishment of socialist principles in Iranian society and politics. He also plays an important role in leading Gilani workers protesting and striking against the governmental authorities including factory owners and employers. Unlike Mahyar's global vision, Sirous focuses on domestic affairs such as the betterment of the lives of the working class. Finally, Gilan, the schoolmistress, can be describes as traditional intellectual trying to reform the current state of affairs. Both Gilan and Sirous coming from a working class are seeking to gain independence from the master family, the Ahang's. They both have focused on the improvement of their class status and consciousness along with removing the existing differences between the classes.

Radi in an interview in 2009 states that Gilan, as a complete character of the play, is the one always trying to make positive differences with the people she interacts and gets acquaintance (p. 259). Mahyar as Radi himself believes (p. 236) is more of a humanist intellectual seeking to discover the real reasons behind the events and move the people forward along the right path; his anti-war articles in French newspapers and his book on law are cases in point. He is frustrated and somehow alienated, mostly because of the rage of the war in Europe and the ineffectiveness of his writings

in making people realize of the devastating effects of war and putting an end to it. Holub (1997) explains that of the traits of the intellectuals is their criticism of any government system violated the lives of the people (p. 163); their ultimate goal is to build bridge between people and the state or governmental institution in way a that a constructive dialogue takes place between them (ibid). Mahyar is determined to have his teaching position at Lausanne University so that he might be able to work and make a change in an international community. One reason for such decision is the realization that his mother and brother are taking advantage of his presence to provide an excuse to force the Shafiti family move out their dwelling place.

In this way, Mahyar encounters with class warfare in his own place of living as a microcosm of the entire Iranian society. For instance, concerning Gilan's teen life in a conversation between the mother and the son, Mahyar supports her education in one of the Rasht's best secondary schools while at the same time the mother describes her as a girl with bare feet and lice in her hair (Radi, 2013, p. 103). Mahyar himself enrolled Gilan in a high school and encouraged her to be a schoolmistress after graduation. Even living in a European country has not satisfied him; he is aware of the fact that having conducted his doctorate in Law might and written articles against Nazism and Fascism would not be quite effective in fulfilling his goals. In a conversation with Gilan in the third act, he laments: MAHYAR: [...] I am 27 years old and I've not done a damn thing.

GILAN: At least you have written a book in French, got a degree which not anyone able to do.

MAHYAR: I just ate and slept, went to college, or sat in cafes to write and argue about the war, the Reich, the nuclear bomb, and that didn't help a bit this country of you and me. Nothing at all! (ibid, p. 87-8) It is evident that Mahyar, due to his humanist beliefs and his apolitical thinking, perfectly knows that the cultural patterns of his country are against the Stalinism of Sirous and Nazism of Bahman – the party versus the government. When Bahman and Sirous in dinner time arguing fiercely over their political standpoints, he puts all the dictators of history on scale pan and by comparing them with the Persian poet Hafiz (1315-90 AD), widely known for his mystic and philosophical poetry, he comes down on them:

To put it in a nutshell, when you have Hafiz, who are you looking for? Genghis Khan, Napoleon? Hitler? All these giants or heroes of history look ridiculous

and puny as compared to one line of our subtle Hafiz verse. Stop this!" (ibid, 47-8)

What has frustrated Mahyar in his homecoming is witnessing the sons of Ahang and Shafti families struggling to be superior over one another, one by Stalinism and the other by Nazism. He finds his house as a battleground of ideas repeating two sides of war in Europe. Gilan also mentions Mahyar the fight between Sirous and Bahman is mostly because of the Behistun house. In fact, Mahyar's homecoming, after his father's death, is a kind of refuge or escapism in the world of writing and thinking; he concedes his defeat in not being effective in stopping the violence of all-out war in Europe; he has reasoned out his intellectual practice as futile, either in abroad or at home, particularly after his witnessing of the verbal abuse and violence of in his home territory. It is Gilan who, as more determined and self-standing than Mahyar, tries to encourage Mahyar and influence his positively. Mahyar is a passive character in the play; he is uncertain to express his decision about the inherited house which is the cause of conflict in the second act onward.

Another problem regarding the case of Mahyar which Radi represents is Mahyar's cutting off from his old values and traditions. The twentieth-century Iran has witnessed a clash between tradition and modernity since the Constitutional Revolution 1905-11 which aimed at the imposition of restriction on monarchic power and introduction of the discourse of modernity in Iranian society and politics (Abrahamian, 1982). In this connection, Radi pushes forth a compromise between tradition and modernity; in his view, modernity needs to embrace traditions, not simply disregard them. Iran, characteristically, is a highly traditional and conservative country, and the project of modernization without regarding the traditional roots of the nation would eventually doom to failure. The play shows one of the consequences of Mahyar's sojourn in Lausanne is the loss of his religious faith which is culturally an important aspect of Iranian society. As a gesture of love, he gives his necklace containing Quranic words to a Swiss woman, and later she returns the necklace to Mahyar as a sign of the end of their romantic relationship. The woman also tells him that this necklace is of value in his homeland not here in Switzerland. Part of the alienation felt by Mahyar in Europe, apart from the brutality and violence of war, is his distance from his Iranian traditions including his religious faith. His return to his hometown is an excuse for seclusion, a time to ponder.

However, as noted above, the presence of Gilan as a complementary figure helps him to realize his potential and decide firmly at the close of the play.

After witnessing the hatred and discriminatory behaviour of his family toward the Shafti family, Mahyar decides to leave Rasht to Lausanne without giving the deeds of the inherited house to his family. He seeks to pursue his humanist actions such as writing against the autocratic governments and war:

MAHYAR: Yes (*he closes the lid of the suitcase*). And now without the necklace and with only one suitcase and a flood of words, I am about to face own destiny. I' like to write books and wage war on evil and violence instead of hatred, pride and blood feuds; I'd like to give the world light, humbleness, glory... (Radi, 2013, pp. 110-11)

Gilan, falling for Mahyar, interferes and stops his departure. The intellectual discourse that Radi shapes and promotes here is a blending of Gramscian traditional and organic intellectuals. From Radi's perspective, these two types of intellectuals should work together in order to function efficiently in public. Radi's play suggests that a domestic intellectual like Gilan and an internationally humanist intellectual as Mahyar might complement one another. Education is also a key factor in nurturing the skills of an intellectual. Mahyar's doctoral program in Switzerland and Gilan's education in the best high school of Rasht, along with her being a teacher at the same school, indicates the degree of intellectual activity of individuals and their role in the process of development, in particular the 1940s and 1950s Iran where the politics of modernization and development was highly sponsored by the State and various kinds of intellectuals. In several of Radi's plays, the image of school or academic institutions highlights this fact, and it is also a reflection of Gramsci's contention that "school is the instrument through which intellectuals of various levels are elaborated" (Gramsci, 1989, p. 117). Eventually, Gilan, as a poor girl experienced the biased feudal system, reminds Mahyar that: "To plant a tree or defend the oppressed is not necessarily mean that you should ride your faint horse and search the frontlines or legendary tales. The garden, the oppressed are here before you. It just needs a bit artfulness to see" (Radi, 2013, p. 113).

Unlike Mahyar's concern over the fate of humanity and his anti-war attitude, Gilan mainly worries about the condition of her pupils. By allocating her monthly salary and receiving charity, she understands the

necessity of buying 17 pairs of shoes for the poor students in wintertime.

MAHYAR: What happened? Are you upset? Did I say something?

GILAN: Its midwinter and my children don't have shoes to wear.

MAHYAR: Your children? (*Halfjokingly*) How many of them do you have?

GILAN: 17. They don't have comfortable shoes. They are bare-footed.

MAHYAR: 17 pairs...for school children?

GILAN: I have to deliver the shoes to their homes tonight.

MAHYAR: How can you do it with a hundred fifty Tomans salary?

GILAN: I will collect charity. (ibid, p. 115)

Gilan is the critic of the current state of affairs in her society, and at the same time she also engages herself actively in making changes the existing structures in order to improve social status. Radi presents that these two kinds of Gramscian intellectuals do not stand against one another; rather, they might complete each other, and as a result of which a new definition of Iranian intellectual will be formed – the one with both domestic and global tendency.

It can be seen that Gilan, in addition to the strong interaction she develops with the audience, fulfils what Gramsci speaks of the functionality of an intellectual in public sphere (1989, p. 115). She fills the gaps in Mahyar's vision since he is ignorant of the present situation of Iranian society, its struggle to rewrite the old orders such as the rising of the bourgeoisie and disappearance of feudal-serf system. Moreover, since the setting of the play is in Iran of the early 1940s, the time when the country has been invaded by Anglo-Soviet troops due to Reza Shah's support of Nazism in the Second World War (Stewart, 1988). At the end of the play, Mahyar decides to stay in Rasht and likely to marry Gilan. The marriage bond between these two and the possible wedding of Mary and Sirous, in the act two Mary mentions her love of Sirous, is Radi's resolution to the conflict of the play which is the Ahang's' house on Behistun Street. The significance of these marriages is nothing but the violation of the conventions of lord/serf dichotomy. The play, therefore, stages a revolt of the young generation of two different families against the old order, against Afagh Ahang and his elder son Bahman who are still in support of feudalism and determining the boundaries of the serfdom.

Radi puts forward the idea that an Iranian intellectual needs to equip with both domestic and global vision. In his view, an intellectual, such as Mahyar, having universally humanist views might distance from cultural and ethical values of his homeland's society; as a consequence, he will be of no use for intellectual labour in public. For Radi, the solution can be found in the union of two Gramscian kinds of intellectual and a compromise between the discourse of modernity and the long-established Iranian traditions. Stated differently, Radi first presents the pathology of intellectual practice in modern Iran, and then offers his solution which is the redefinition of an intellectual and his function in public. After the fall of Reza Shah and invasion of Iran by the Anglo-Soviet military forces, the socio-political structures of Iranian life were altered; as a result, new orders and principles would have been introduced and pursued (Katouzian, 2003). In this fashion, many believed in the power of intellectualism to analyze the situation and carry out progressive improvement in society.

In the third act of play, after Bahman breaks Sirous's head with his father's wooden walking stick and swearing and ranting in German like the passionate speeches of Hitler, Mahyar grabs the stick breaks it in half. This act is the rejection of Nazism and above all the violence and oppression of the feudal lords against the working class labouring for them. It is, in order words, a firm action against the old traditional beliefs of the Ahang family and Bahman's aggressive behavior. At the end, *Melody of a Rainy City* represents that the future of society is dependent on the establishment of new orders, and the disappearance of any kind of oppressive structure such as feudalism and putting an end to violence.

5. CONCLUSION

It is widely accepted that Iranian intellectuals can lead the public to overcome social problems. They also can be influential in working out a compromise between the long-standing conflict between the two discourses of modernity and traditionalism in contemporary Iranian context, flared up from the Constitutional Revolution of 1905. With the abdication of Reza Shah and the burning flames of the Second World War in Europe, Iran was invaded by the Anglo-Soviet forces in 1941 resulted in the increase of the problems of the country. The general tendency of Iranian society was that the intellectual class might be quite effective in

resolving political tensions and improving Iranian social life in the twentieth-century Iran.

As a prominent contemporary playwright, Akbar Radi represents an Iranian intellectual as someone having both domestic and global vision. In his view, an intellectual should be a humanist engaging himself in political affairs of his country; he should work within the international context as well. In his major play *Melody of a Rainy City*, Radi dramatizes the conflict between two families, the Ahang's as the feudal lords and the Shafiti's as the serfs working for the Ahang's in Iran of 1940s. It shows the way in which feudalism is about to replace with bourgeoisie. The drama, moreover, stages Gramscian traditional and organic intellectuals to finally arrive at the conclusion that the union of these two kinds of socialist intellectuals might be the right answer to several challenging questions raised in contemporary Iranian history. Radi represents Mahyar as an organic intellectual whose intellectual pursuit and social status lead him to seclusion and indetermination. The answer to this problem is Gilan, a traditional intellectual in Gramscian sense, whose domestic approach and traditional thinking finally encourage Mahyar to act properly at the end of the play. Their love and likely marriage will be symbolically interpreted as the union of traditional and organic intellectuals. The play also represents Sirous as a traditional Marxist intellectual in clash with Bahman supporting Nazism and authoritarianism in general.

Briefly speaking, by staging various intellectuals in *Melody of a Rainy City* and defining their social ties, Radi aims to introduce a new definition of intellectualism Iranian society needs to have. Radi postulates that an Iranian intellectual, based in Gramscian formulation, needs to embrace his rich culture and human as well as having his global vision. He should implement politics of modernity and modernization without disregarding the traditional values of his society.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Ramin Farhadi, M.A. in English Literature, Azad University of Karaj, is an independent scholar who has published several articles in various internationally

refereed journals such as *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature* (IJALLEL), *Education Research Journal*, and *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* (ALLS). His research interests comprise contemporary British stage, Persian fiction as well as drama, and Shakespeare.

Mohammad Amin Mozaheb, Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, is the Head of the Department of Foreign Languages at Imam Sadiq University, Language Center, Tehran, Iran. He has published numerous articles in a number of journals including *ELT (Canada)* and *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* (Finland). He has also written some books on ELT related topics. Moreover, he has participated in a number of inter/national conferences. His main research interests include EFL testing, literary and language studies and discourse analysis.

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