

Sadegh Hedayat from the "Descriptive Psychiatry" View-Point

Farbod Fadai, MD*

(Received: 27 March 2008 ; Accepted: 5 March 2009)

Objective: With regard to the abundance of mood disorders among the artists and, life and death of Hedayat, number and time of creation of his works, this hypothesis that Hedayat suffered from a bipolar mood disorder (type II, or bipolar spectrum) is studied in the descriptive psychiatry framework.

Methods: His biographies, medical records, letters exchanged between him and his friends and relatives, and reports by his acquaintances, number and time of creation, form and structure (but not the content of his writings) are scrutinized, assessed and measured according to the strict criteria of contemporary descriptive psychiatry.

Results: It was shown that besides full blown depressive episodes and two documented attempted suicides (1928 and 1951, the second one led to his death), Hedayat was generally known as a jovial, humorist, lively, and exaggeratedly generous man. It was found out that the rate of creation of his 66 literary works did not follow a steady or monotonous course. Instead, during hypomanic phases he wrote abundantly, but during depressive phases he had no literary creation. In times between, when in a normal mood, he wrote one or two stories in a year. In the three years preceding his completed suicide (1951), he did not write at all and even tore the manuscripts of his unpublished works to pieces some days before suicide.

Conclusion: The above findings are all consistent with this conclusion that Sadegh Hedayat suffered from the bipolar mood disorder, type II.

Iranian Journal of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences (IJPBS), Volume 3, Number 1, Spring and Summer 2009: 19-26.

Keywords: Art • Bipolar Mood Disorder • Genius • Sadegh Hedayat • Suicide

Introduction

A mong the Contemporary Iranian writers, Sadegh Hedayat has attracted the most attention of the national and international readers and scholars to his works and personality (1). No other Iranian writer has succeeded to be investigated in works and personality from so different aspects. This is due to some characteristics, such as genius of Hedayat, the strangeness of his works, his life, and the way he died. In addition to literary interpretations and critics, we have always observed psychological, psychiatric, and sociological interpretations about the personality and works of Hedayat (2-8). In general, in order to apprehend the psychological or psychiatric characteristics of Hedayat, his works were interpreted and based on them some conclusions



were made. This approach does not seem to be able to capture the writer personality or to provide a scale of his/her mental health or illness, because the artist has a power to reach to and float in the different parts of his/her psychic apparatus-from the most superficial to the deepest layer-and at the same time to maintain the contact to the reality (9). Indeed,

Authors' affiliations : * University of Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences.

•**Corresponding author :** Farbod Fadai, MD, Associate Professor of Psychiatry, University of Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
Tel : +98 21 22180140
Fax : +98 21 33401604
E-mail: Farbodfadai@uswr.ac.ir

this is the reason why there are so many descriptions written about the different type of thoughts, emotions, normal and abnormal behaviors, and mental disorders of famous literary men (and women), despite the fact that none of them have had a mental illness or a personality problem. Trying to know the artist only by the content or structure of his/her works is deficient in a precise (succinct) scientific basis. According to the lay men and some researchers, social and political conditions along with the situations of life are the most important elements in an artistic creation. While these elements can not be overlooked, they are not the most important ones. Regarding to Hedayat, according to some researchers, the existence of the disease, decadence, or death in the Hedayat's works is due to the presence of these elements in that period. This explanation does not seem to be fully correct. If so, why these elements does not show up in the works of other writers of that period in Iran, and why the rates of depression and suicide in the general population were not higher than the other periods. Besides, we know that Hedayat wrote many humorous and satirical stories and articles (10) and according to his acquaintances' observations, he from time to time was a happy and humorous man (11).

Some authors, physician or non physician, who didn't have the essential scientific or literary knowledge or scrutiny, after a superficial evaluation of Hedayat's works, have misinterpreted him as a psychotic (12). It must be noted that the description of diseases in a writer's work does not indicate that the author is suffering from those diseases. That is, there is no sign of psychosis in the life of Hedayat. Some researchers have attributed the abundance of depressive topics in Hedayat works as an internal problem and depression in Hedayat. Even though their conclusions are relativity correct, nevertheless they have not been able to answer this incongruity why many times Hedayat have been described by his friends as a jolly, humorous, jovial, thoughtful, lively, active, and generous person. In fact, these mood and behavioral paradoxes are not expected in a simply depressed person. During the last decade, the researchers have focused on the

probable existence of mental disorders among the artists. Researches on the biographies, medical records, and the letters of the artists have confirmed that among the artists in general, and among the writers and poets in special, the rate of psychopathology is above that in the general population. For example, Dr. Felix Post, a famous British psychiatrist, spent 10 year in research on the existence of mental disorders amongst the 300 persons selected between the well known men (according to his strict criteria with very high fame and authenticity among their peers) in the last 150 years. By evaluating those distinguished people in 6 groups consisting of the scientists, the philosophers and scholars, the politicians, the figurative artists, the musicians, and the writers, Dr. Post has concluded that while the sate of psychopathology is lower than the average in general population, it increases respectively in the later 5 groups. For example, the rate of depression among the artists, more specifically among the writers, is high. That is, according to his research, 72% of the writers have suffered from one of the types of depression (13).

Even though an intensive attention was paid to Dr. Post's findings, but it has been realized later on that he overlooked an important point, which was the creative episodes of those writers, accompanied with some eccentricities. Dr. Post did not address these episodes, which in a more subtle evaluation, resembled mania and hypomania episodes (bipolar disorders type I and type II) (14). The artists do not regard these episodes as abnormal. Also, the people around them consider these episodes as signs of artistic behavior and temperament. Bipolar patients generally do not regard manic or hypomanic conditions as abnormal, and even during euthymic moods, they would like (carve) to return to those elevated moods. In their opinions, only the depressive episodes need treatment. The artists with bipolar disorders generally have periods of major depression that after a while is replaced by mania (bipolar I) or hypomania (bipolar II), as pointed out by Jamison (15) and Andreasen (16) based on their intensive researches and numerous evidences. In a research by the author of this article, presented in 1998 in Tehran, the rate of mood disorders, especially bipolar disorders, among

the Iranian artists is remarkable (17). Considering the above stated facts, the current research about Hedayat has started with this assumption that he was suffering from bipolar mood disorder (type II or bipolar spectrum) (18).

Materials and Methods

The materials are consisted of undeniable data and evidences about the life and manners of Hedayat, including his talks or writings about his own life, what his family members or friends have stated, and the statements about him made by his family members and friends. The letters exchanged between him and his family or friends, medical records, and his photographs are among the materials used that are mentioned in the references. In addition, the quantity of Hedayat's works along with the time of their creations has been taken into consideration (10, 19).

Results

Only a few of the numerous documents that were evaluated will be cited here as follows:

Hosaingholikhhan Hedayat, his cousin, in an interview with Esmail Jamshidi quotes from his mother about Sadegh as: "This child is a genius.", and once her mother told Hedayat that: "Your genius will lead you to insanity." (20). In fact, through childhood without apparent reason, he was different from the other family members. During school days, he published a wall newspaper titled "Sound of the Dead" (20). Jesus Hedayat, his elder brother says about Sadegh's first suicidal attempt as: "It was 1928 that ... once Sadegh unexpectedly came to visit me, those days I was in Fountain Bleue. We dined together, and then I took him to Samoi, where it is crossed by the river Marne. We walked and went to a cafe till sundown. Then, we said good bye and departed. During farewell, his gaze was calm and confident." When Jesus Hedayat came back home in midnight, he found out that Police had brought Sadegh-who had attempted to drown himself in Marne-to his home. Then, Jesus discovered that before the suicidal attempt, Sadegh bade farewell secretly with

many other people. The morning after the event, Hossein Ala, Iran's ambassador in France, Called Jesus from the embassy and said: "I must see Sadegh as soon as possible. I even must introduce him to a professor of psychiatry". After visiting Sadegh, the professor, by telling that Sadegh was perceiving the world through a dark glass, confirmed that he was depressed (11, 20).

When 23 years old, Hedayat in a letter to his friend, Dr. Razawi, wrote: "If you want to send me a postal card, select a dark, sad, and terrifying one, because I like it this way." (20).

All the above testimonials confirm that there have been differences in attitude and mood condition between Hedayat and his peers, and they suggest that he had a tint of depression in his character. On the other hand, again, according to his acquaintances, he showed long periods of wit, humor, and liveliness, in his life. Dr. Khanlari has written about Hedayat as: "Those who had seen him in ceremonies and parties, thought that Hedayat was a joyous man with no regard and respect for anything". Another friend of him, Bozorg Alawi, has written about Hedayat as: "Only a few people really knew him. His true character was hidden under a curtain of recklessness". Touraj Farazmand, a close friend of Hedayat, wrote: "He occasionally had misbehaviors that led him to physical fights and Police stations. He occasionally had visits to the meanest, dirtiest and filthiest places, as well." (21).

Sadegh Hedayat was a lavish person and used to spend his money recklessly. He often showed interest in spending times with friends. These behaviors and manners that certainly can not fall within a depression framework and are even in contrast with depression, from a psychiatric point of view can be considered as signs of hypomania that presents itself cyclically and between depressive periods (14). During one of depressive episodes, he drank a combination of alcoholic drinks with opium to kill himself, but his friends saved him (20).

A number of researchers have addressed to some concepts and ideas in Hedayat's writings as an evidence indicating depression in him. As stated previously, the evaluation of only the contents of the works of an artist to assess his/her psychopathology is not a precise tool.

In addition, it must be noted that the contents of Hedayat's stories are not alike. Even though most of his works are dark and sad, some others are humorous and indicate a happy attitude; for example, some short satirical stories that he co-authored by Masud Farzad and Hasan Ghaemian and named them Ghaziyeh (statement). Some of his realistic stories, such as Hadji Agha, are mixed with humor, and they imply a jovial and humorous character of the writer. In "Toup Morvari" [The pearl cannon], we can visualize a happy and lively character experiencing signs of hypomania and even mania, such as pressure of thought, quick associations, circumstantialities, clang association, and mental preoccupation about sexual matters.

As the time passed, the depressive episodes of Hedayat became more apparent and longer, suggesting the inevitable course of bipolar mood disorder. Khanlari, his close friend, has written about the last years of Hedayat's life as: "Sometimes he sat motionless and said nothing, only wearing a bitter and scornful smile, I took a photo of one of those occasions". Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh in May 11, 1951 disclosed a letter from Hedayat written to him 2.5 years earlier. In this letter, Hedayat wrote: "... The principal subject is that misfortune, tiredness, disinterest, weariness, and hatred have overwhelmed me. Nothing more is possible. I have no interest to complain or to cry, I can not deceive myself, and I do not have courage to suicide All things are dead end and there is no way to escape." (20). Mostafa Farzaneh, one of his friends who visited him few days before his suicide says that during the visit, after some discussions, I asked him: "You tore your writings and threw them away yesterday, have no zest to go to circus or zoo, the handle of your eye glass frame has been broken for some weeks and you do not repair it. Tell me the truth. What is the meaning of all these? What is the matter with you?" And Hedayat responded: "There is nothing to say, it is called mood change, and sometimes the situation is so bad that I can not help it." (11).

In August 27, 1950, Hedayat wrote: "I am massacring the days. The only thing that matters is that amnesia has added to other

sequel. It is in fact a blessing for me." (20). It must be noted that the lack of thought concentration that presents itself in the forms of forgetfulness and amnesia is a symptom of depressive episode.

Saeed Naficy, a great Iranian literary man who was a relative of Sadegh Hedayat, 3 weeks after Hedayat's death wrote: "Losing this friend was very unpleasant to me. However, I was certain that he would kill himself one day, and I knew that he attempted to kill himself several times And I was certain that his purpose to go to Paris was to kill himself there" (20).

Hedayat's first suicidal attempt was in spring of 1928 in France and his last suicidal attempt that led to his death was in spring of 1951. This is an important observation that in contrast to laymen opinion, most of the completed suicides take place in spring season (14). It is probable that biological factors play a role in this phenomenon. However, it is also possible that spring time, the time of blooming, growth, and proliferation-in contrast to the internal condition of the depressed person-would increase the pain and sorrow of the depressed person and lead him to suicide.

Now, in the following, some of the characteristics of Hedayat that conform to the diagnosis of Bipolar Mood Disorder type II are outlined.

A: The characteristics conforming major depressive episodes in sadegh Hedayat:

- 1-The average age in the beginning of illness (30 years or less) that conforms to Hedayat's condition.
- 2-Depressed mood, according to his acquaintances' memories and his letters.
- 3-Lack of interest and pleasure toward the environment (with regard to his close friends' memories and his letters).
- 4-Physical condition (anorexia, weight loss, poor stamina that was apparent in last weeks of his life).
- 5-Fatigue and difficulty in completing tasks (that were apparent periodically).
- 6-Feeling of worthlessness and guilt (with respect to his letters and also the memories of his acquaintances to whom he complained about these feelings).

- 7- Decreased thought concentration.
- 8- Recurrent thoughts about death and suicide, repeated suicidal attempts (completed suicide in 1951).
- 9- Other signs and symptoms, including insomnia, Psychomotor slowing.

B: Hedayat's characteristics conforming hypomanic episodes:

- 1- Elevated or irritable mood (according to his acquaintances' memories).
- 2- Decreased need to sleep.
- 3- Logorhea, pressure of talk and circumstantialities according to his close friends.
- 4- Doing high risk acts and negligence toward social rules and etiquettes, like abusing alcohol and narcotics.
- 5- Inflated self-esteem: Talking about inflated self-esteem in Hedayat is difficult because he was indeed superior to his literary contemporaries with respect to general knowledge, literary abilities, and artistic genius. However, he had a natural, innate, and talented taste to criticize others. Nobody, especially those who had a phony fame and authenticity, could escape from his vehement and devaluating phrases and remarks.

C: In order to evaluate the quantity of Hedayat's works and the effect of his mood disorder on this quantity, we consider Fig.1. This figure shows the plot of the number of Hedayat's literary works versus the times that he wrote them.

This figure indicates that Hedayat has not created his 66 works in a steady manner. In the years corresponding to his elevated mood (hypomania), he has produced many works

including both his own writings and translations. But during depressive episodes, he has not written at all. In the years 1931, 1933, 1940, 1941, he wrote 4 works per year. In 1943, he had 5 works, and in 1944 he wrote 6 works. In 1945, that is the acme of his creative episodes, he created 10 works. In 1946, he created 5 works.

In the years 1925, 1929, 1935, 1949, 1950, and 1951, he did not write at all. These years are related to his severe depressive mode, the depression that did not remit and finally led him to his death due to suicide.

In the years 1926, 1927, 1932, 1934, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1947, and 1948 that he was euthymic, he wrote one or two works per year.

Discussion

There were prominent literary and statesmen in the Hedayat extended family. Among them is Reza Gholi Khan Hedayat, an artist genius who wrote many literary books. At age 50, Gholi Khan Hedayat wrote a poem in which the signs of depression were apparent. Hadj Mokhberolsaltaneh Hedayat, a renowned politician that has written a valuable book titled: "Memories and Dangers" as a biography, was a close relative of Sadegh Hedayat.

There are some cases of psychiatric problems in distant relatives of Hedayat that can not be stated here due to the medical ethics. In future, there might be the possibility of discussing those cases to enhance the conclusion of this research by the comers.

Now, the following question arises: assuming the presence of Bipolar Mood Disorder type II in Hedayat, what effect this has in his artistic creation or in interpretation of his work? Even

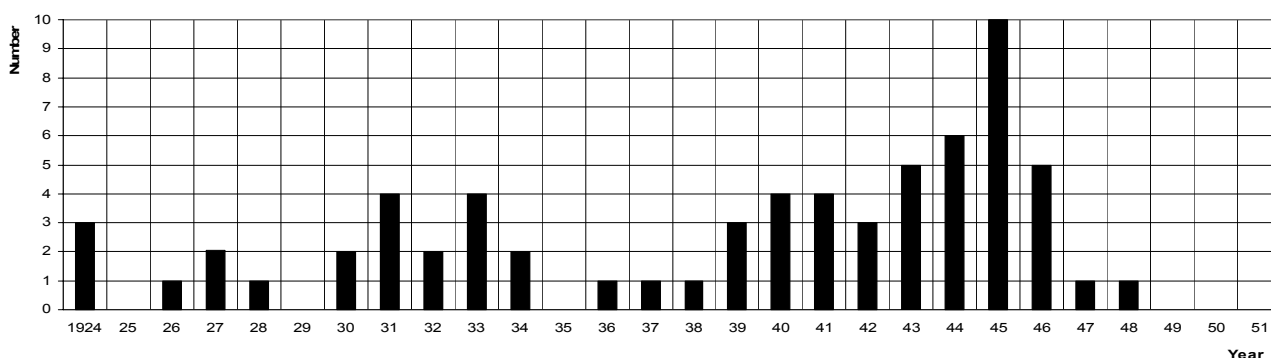


Figure 1. Quantitative Scale of Hedayat's Literary Works

though many celebrated artists did not suffer from bipolar mood disorder or major depression, and although the majority of the people suffering from bipolar mood disorder or major depression do not have artistic creativity, the simultaneous existence of bipolar mood disorder (and sometimes cyclothymia) along with artistic talent can lead to remarkable artistic creations. There is possibility that people with temperament being inclined to extreme emotions choose the artistic professions. These artists usually have symptoms of emotional instability before the beginning of their artistic profession, and they demonstrate a pattern of mood disorders, which especially is the characteristic of manic-depressive illness spectrum.

During the mild forms of mania, many thought and ideas might be revealed in the mind of artist, but the constructions, organizations, editions, and final elaboration of artistic work are mostly made during the euthymic or a mild depressed mood. Mania and its milder conditions can lead to new thoughts and associations, increase the contact with other people, induce abundant strength and passion, and finally throw a fascinating color to life. On the other hand, depression lessens the pulse of life, depresses the fervent passion, and criticizes the thoughts, observations, and feelings that were appeared during the passionate episodes of mania. Mild depression acts as a coast wave breaker and has an important edition role for a work that was produced in a feverish condition. Mild depression trims the work like an experienced gardener and cuts like a skillful jeweler. Mild depression can make the person to review, harmonize, and deliberate the thought and idea. A mildly depressed attitude in its essence seeks for the meaning. The sensitivity and kindness due to depression are not observed in the manic self confident, irrepressible, and hectic pulsation. The inclination to introspection and arising the question that "why and for what benefit?" can deeply be found in the depressed attitude. Using the milder forms of depression for remembering the painful period of severe melancholia can let a cautious plunging in the deep basin of emotion and at the same time provides an access along with control to the hind and abandoned cells of the unconscious.

The artist describes and dissolves his psychological pain in an experiment with a universal concept. His/her voyage in an untraceable meadow converts to a search that the others can also have under his/her supervision and support. Inside the harmony and beauty of most of the transcendent works of art, there exists a special sorrow, which acts like a generative motor, a ring in a chain of power that forces the artist to change the artistic form even after the end of the experience. When the creative personality has achieved its mature existence, a great wealth of sorrow is accumulated in the person which forces itself to be freed. This sorrow is apparent in almost every page of Hafiz's pure poems, in every thought-evoking scene of Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, in Hedayat's short stories, in the lieds of Schubert and Schumann, and in the celestial compositions of Beethoven.

Nobody has written, painted, sculpted, erected a building, invented, or explored, unless, along with many other goals, to make himself/herself be free from tension and sorrow. Art first cures the artist then helps to treat other people.

Lord Byron describes the liberating role of poem as quoted: "Poem is the lava of imagination and fantasy that its eruption prevents the earthquake ... It is said that the poets rarely become insane but are generally very close to insanity, and I can not think of this that poetic harmony is so beneficial in anticipation and prevention of mind agitation". Eliot that wrote the "Wasteland" during recovery from a nervous breakdown states as such: "Poesis is not freeing the emotions, but it is liberation from emotions. Poesis is not the expression of the personality, but it is the deliverance from the personality." (15).

Artistic Creation not only acts as a vehicle to rescue from the pain, but is also a way to organize emotions and agitated thoughts. It numbs and alleviates the pain by means of abstraction and the potency of organized thought, and accordingly by making distance from the source of hopelessness. The artist writes, composes, and paints to protect himself/herself in a cover of words, songs, and colors.

The presence of bipolar mood disorder type II in an artist can make him more sensitive to

the events in comparison with the general population. Some trivialities acquire a special importance for the artist, and the emotional subjects gain an intensive consideration for him/her. If some artistic works seem and appear as novel and interesting, it is due to the fact that the artist comes across the subjects from the aspect different from ours. Our interest in an artistic work and the work's effectiveness are not related to the health or illness of its creator. In fact, the sickness of an artist does not decrease the artistic value of the work. However, knowing about the illness of an artist can enhance our knowledge about the process of artistic creation.

Some scholars believe that Hedayat's familiarity with psychology and psychoanalysis had effects on his creativity. There is no doubt that Hedayat was familiar with art, philosophy, and science of his era, including psychoanalysis and its influence on literature and art of that period. So, it is possible that intentionally or unintentionally, some concepts from that area were integrated in his works. Nevertheless, this can not be considered as a deficiency. In the contrary, the more the knowledge of an artist is, the deeper and wider his works will be. If Beethoven did not know about the art and science of the past and his own time and also about mythology, his works could be different from what they are.

At the end, a phrase from Lord Byron, a British poet who was suffering from bipolar mood disorder, is quoted that well captures the condition of Hedayat (Please note that this phrase is made at the time that there was no treatment for bipolar disorder): "Their lives are a storm that they ride it till ultimately fall." (22).

Conclusion

Sadegh Hedayat is the most famous contemporary Iranian writer that his fame is due not only to his artistic genius, but also to his life style and death. According to various schools of thought, different approaches were used to evaluate the personality and works of Hedayat by many scholars, but most of them suffer from serious methodological inadequacies. As a result, various incorrect conclusions, such as diagnosis of schizophrenia, complete

mental health, an absolute effect of his philosophical perspective on his life and death, effect of merely social problems on him, have been made.

In the current article, for the first time, to the best knowledge of the author, Sadegh Hedayat is scrutinized from a descriptive point of view, clear of any political or social bias, only based on authentic biographies, medical records, letters exchanged between him and his friends and relatives, descriptions of him by his acquaintances, and finally the quantity and times of creations of his works. With regard to those documents, it was substantiated that he was suffering from bipolar mood disorder type II.

Hedayat's illness does not make him or his work degraded or devaluated. As clearly stated previously, the illness does not degrade the value and place of the artist. In fact, the bipolar mood disorder has been frequently observed in many art geniuses so much that some scholars have considered this mental illness as a prerequisite for an artistic creation.

Acknowledgments

The collaboration of Ali Fazel, MD, in the review of the references is acknowledged.

References

1. Ghaemian H. [The comments of great foreign writers on Sadegh Hedayat.] Tehran: Amir Kabir Publication; 1964. Persian.
2. Khajehnouri A. [Is suicide a kind of courage and devotion?] *Khandaniha Journal* 1959; 20(6): 50-1. Persian.
3. Soroushabadi M. [Psychological evaluation of Sadegh Hedayat.] Tehran: Amir Kabir Publication; 1959. Persian.
4. Shariatmadari ME. [Sadegh Hedayat and psychoanalytic evaluation of his works.] Tehran: Published by the author; 1964. Persian.
5. Ghaemian H. [Literary hypocrisy and the works of Sadegh Hedayat.] Tehran: Ramin Publications; 1975. Persian.
6. Yavari H. [Psychoanalysis and literature.] Tehran: Iran History Publication; 1995. Persian.

7. Sanati M. [Sadegh Hedayat and fear of death.] Tehran: Markaz Publication; 2001. Persian.
8. Sanati M. [Psychological analyses in art and literature.] Tehran: Markaz Publication; 2001. Persian.
9. Maanavi E, Fadai F. [Art from a psychiatric point of view.] Tehran: Teacher Publications; 1983. Persian.
10. Gholbon M. [Bibliography of Sadegh Hedayat.] Tehran: Tous Publication; 1977. Persian.
11. Farzaneh M. [An introduction to Sadegh Hedayat.] 2nd ed. Tehran: Markaz Publication; 1995. Persian.
12. Paimani H. [Proper evaluation of Sadegh Hedayat.] Tehran: Aban Publication; 1963. Persian.
13. Post F. Creativity and psychopathology. *British J Psychiat*. 1994; 165: 22-34.
14. Akiskal HS. Mood disorders. In: Sadock B J, and Sadock V A, editors. *Kaplan and Sadock's Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins; 2005. Vol. 2. P. 1559-1717.
15. Jamison KR. *Touched with fire*. New York: Free Press; 1993.
16. Andreasen NC. Creativity and mental illness. *American J Psychiat* 1987; 144: 1288-96.
17. Fadai F. [Chronic mood disorders in Iranian artists.] *Proceeding of the first congress on chronic mental disorders*; 1998 June; Tehran, Iran. Tehran: The Congress; 1998. Persian.
18. Ghaemi SN. *Mood disorders*. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams and Wilkins; 2003, P: 202 –13.
19. Hedayat S. [Complete published works of Hedayat including standard series, from 1951 to 1978.] Tehran: Amir Kabir Publication. Persian.
20. Jamshidi E. [Suicide of Sadegh Hedayat.] Tehran: Zarrin Publication; 1994. Persian.
21. Group of authors. [In the memory of Sadegh Hedayat.] Los Angeles: Published by the authors; 2002.
22. Marchand LA, Byron A. *Portrait*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1979.