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## The School Principal and the Children: Patriarchy and Changing Childhoods in Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad’s Novella

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### Abstract

*The School Principal* introduces readers to a disillusioned and sarcastic teacher who transitions to the role of school principal in a peripheral primary school. Often regarded as a social criticism treatise rather than a work of art, the novella is characterized by the narrator’s pervasive cynicism. However, amidst the sarcasm, the principal’s actions reveal a surprising undercurrent of compassion, particularly evident in his interactions with children. This article proposes a compassionate reading of the text, positioning it within the framework of childhood history. The narrative, seen through the lens of childhood history, unveils a cultural shift in Iran during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically in the realm of education. It explores the complexities of transitioning from child labor to formal schooling and the evolving perceptions of children as innocent, passive, and dependent. A key conflict in the novella revolves around the clash between Iranian patriarchy and the emerging concept of modern childhood. The principal grapples with adapting to a new model that places children at the center of societal and familial concerns. Despite attempts to prioritize children’s welfare, the principal struggles to reconcile the demands of patriarchy with the evolving notion of childhood.

**Keywords:** Jalal Āl-e Ahmad; childhood history; patriarchy; education; poverty; sexuality

I really hadn’t a thing to say. I can only recall now that I pointed out something about how the new principal, meaning me, really had wished to have one of them for his own offspring, but now that he had all of them he wasn’t quite sure how to proceed. They were all giggling under their breath and one of them in the middle of the back rows let loose with a guffaw. Suddenly it hit me that in order to get anything across to children, you need a special approach. Afterwards, a cold chill shot through me. “This is going to be no picnic, my friend!”<sup>1</sup>

*The School Principal* (*Modir-e Madrasedh*), Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad’s most well-known and widely-read literary piece, presents its readers with the figure of a disillusioned and sarcastic teacher, who turns to what he believes will be the easier work of a school principal in a peripheral primary school. The narrator’s cynicism is the brush coloring the novella, often referred to as more of a treatise of social criticism than a work of art.<sup>2</sup> The aura of sarcasm and cynicism is mostly felt in the narrator’s references to teachers, parents, and – to an extent – himself.

<sup>1</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 43.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Hillman’s introduction in Āl-e Ahmad, 18–19; Hillmann, “Al-e Ahmad’s Fictional Legacy,” 249–51; Dabashi, *The Last Muslim Intellectual*, 187.

However, when examining the principal's actions and approach to children, the novella is imbued not with sarcasm but with compassion.<sup>3</sup>

This article offers a compassionate reading of the text, placing the novella within the framework of childhood history and childhood studies. I claim that reading the book from such a perspective perhaps redeems the narrator, and Āl-e Ahmad himself, from accusations of cynicism voiced by some critics.<sup>4</sup> As Roy Mottahedeh suggests, Āl-e Ahmad's prose style is that "of a man who feels deeply but speaks from a certain ironical distance from his own and others' feelings."<sup>5</sup> Such a reading demonstrates that the book's sarcastic tone is a mere defense mechanism for an author who feels deeply for some of the most vulnerable members of his society – children of the Iranian peripheries.

Furthermore, this novella cum social criticism-treatise demonstrates well the cultural shift Iran experienced during the first half of the 20th century concerning, among other things, children and childhood, mostly in the realm of education. It shows how the transition from child labor to schooling, from children's integration into the world of adults to their segregation to a world of their own, from parents' responsibility for their children's education and welfare to the state's responsibility, alongside the adoption of a perception of children as innocent, passive, pure, and dependent, was anything but smooth and self-evident. This seismic shift in the fabric of Iranian society caused rifts and conflicts, misunderstandings and frustrations, all of which the narrator/author reflects in his story. While Āl-e Ahmad's critique of the Iranian educational system has been discussed by various scholars, mostly in relation to his wider critiques of Pahlavi modernization and Westernization, his approach to children has rarely been touched upon. Ana Ghoreishian, who studied Āl-e Ahmad's fiction from a gendered view, points to the way it reveals patriarchal power dynamics between men and women. Āl-e Ahmad, she writes, "who viewed himself as the champion of the underdog, always wrote his stories with the goal of exposing power and shedding light on the 'oppressed.'"<sup>6</sup> However, patriarchy does not entail only power relations between men and women, but also between adults and children, and children are often the "underdogs" of society. I believe the reading offered in this article illuminates additional aspects of his complex writing and thinking.

The article begins by exploring how the novella reflects historical shifts in the Iranian education system and perceptions of childhood. The first section delves into the external confrontations and disputes involving the protagonist and other characters, as well as his clashes with the system. The subsequent segment then concentrates on the narrator's role as a patriarch and the internal conflicts arising from this position, especially in relation to his compassion for children and his modern perspectives on childhood.

As I demonstrate here, one of the conflicts underlining *The School Principal's* plot is between Iranian patriarchy, modern childhood, and the narrator's engagement with patriarchy. While feminism has posed major challenges to patriarchy, modern childhood and a childist perspective offer a no less significant challenge.<sup>7</sup> In the patriarchal household, authority is vested in the oldest male relative, meaning patriarchy is a gerontocratic structure (in which the elders are at the top of the pyramid). Modern childhood, in contrast, which places children at the center of society and the family, is a neontocratic structure.<sup>8</sup> This often means that, in the patriarchal household, all members must bend to the needs, desires, and demands of the patriarch, while the household should be molded to cater to the needs and habits of children under the aegis of modern

<sup>3</sup> Wells, "The Outsider."

<sup>4</sup> For such an opinion, see: Hillmann, "The Modernist Trend in Persian Literature and Its Social Impact," 20; Clinton, "Review of *The School Principal* by Jalal Al-e Ahmad and John K. Newton," 193.

<sup>5</sup> Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*, 291.

<sup>6</sup> Ghoreishian, "Mirrors of Society," 321; Ghoreishian, "Re-Membering Jalal Al-e Ahmad."

<sup>7</sup> Wall, "From Childhood Studies to Childism," 257.

<sup>8</sup> Lancy, *Anthropological Perspectives*, 2.

childhood.<sup>9</sup> As succinctly put by Abbas Milani, who was a schoolboy in the 1950s, “In our childhood, we suffocated under patriarchy, and today, in our parenting days, we live under the tyranny of our children.”<sup>10</sup> This, however, does not mean that children necessarily hold much power within child-centered households. Decisions are still being made by adults for children, but they are made with the child’s perceived interests in mind. The fact that the principal is enmeshed within the patriarchal matrix, unable to free himself from the adultist tendencies inherent in this structure, makes him (alongside the school community depicted in the novella) a representative of the gradual and incomplete process of changing Iranian children’s status in society. Despite the attempt to create a school where children’s welfare is paramount, the principal’s struggle is to hold on to both patriarchy and the modern concept of childhood at the same time.

### Changing ideas of education and childhood in Iran from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1950s

In the late 1940s, after graduating from the Tehran Teachers Training College, Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad started working as a school teacher; around 1955–6, he became principal of the Safa School in the Tehran suburb of Tajrish. The novella is rooted in his experiences and was written based on notes he took over the year he served as a school principal.<sup>11</sup> His training and occupation link him to almost a century of reformist thinking on education and, as a result, on childhood in Iran. Starting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian aristocrats, diplomats, merchants, and clerics began adopting a new discourse calling for political, social, and cultural change in the country. The need for a new kind of education for the country’s children was central to the thinking of many of these intellectuals. They attacked traditional institutes, their teachers, curricula, forms of discipline, and the physical environment in which children were taught. They also wanted to see the state take responsibility for education and not leave the onus on parents. These reformers considered a literate and modernly educated populace to be a prerequisite to nation and state-building – two projects at the core of the reformist discourse.

The new schools, whose establishment began in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, presented Iranian society with a completely new approach to education and children. Designated buildings were erected to end the practice of schooling children in the homes of teachers, students, or an available room in the bazaar or *madrasah*; children were grouped according to their calendric age; classes were organized according to a weekly timetable and yearly plan; grades and “educational” punishments replaced corporal punishments; the curricula and backgrounds of the teachers changed; and the perception of the purpose of schooling radically shifted.<sup>12</sup> If the *maktab* aspired to cultivate good Muslims, well versed in religious and classic texts, and the *madrasah* trained members for the religious establishment’s various arms, the new schools aimed to shape Iran’s future citizens, educated, industrious, and loyal patriots.

The introduction and spread of schooling at the expense of child work are some of the most significant changes in the global transition to the modern model of childhood. This model is based on the notion of childhood as a sheltered and dependent stage of life, a phase during which children’s main occupations are schooling and play, which should remain separate from adult responsibilities and anxieties. To develop properly into adults, children must be distanced from the adult realms of war, sex, death, work, and politics.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> According to one survey, women in the Islamic Republic turn to permissive education and child-centered approaches as a form of protest against patriarchy. See Kian-Thiébaud, “From Motherhood to Equal Rights Advocates: The Weakening of Patriarchal Order,” 63–64.

<sup>10</sup> Milani, *Tales of Two Cities*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Wells, “Jalal Ale Ahmad: Writer and Political Activist,” 204–7; Dabashi, *The Last Muslim Intellectual*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Balslev, *Iranian Masculinities*, 77–88.

<sup>13</sup> Stearns, *Growing Up*, 42–47.

Schools facilitate the physical separation of children from adult environments and help provide the necessary socialization and training.

Although the *majles* ratified a law in 1911 making primary education compulsory in Iran, the number of schools and students remained very low. In Tehran, the number of primary school students in 1911 was approximately 10,000. Secondary and higher education students numbered approximately 300. An exponential growth of schools and students took place during the reign of Reza Shah. The establishment of a centralized national school system included government control over the curriculum and textbooks, an expansion of teacher training programs, and wider enrollment in schools. However, this enrollment included mostly male students from relatively affluent families in Iran's urban centers. Education for poor, rural, or tribal children, as well as for girls, was still relatively rare. In the 1936–7 school year, only approximately 10% of primary school-aged children went to school, and only 1.3% continued to secondary education. That the state took it upon itself to provide Iranian children with modern education, however, was a significant change from the Qajar period, in which schooling was usually considered a private matter. The national education system continued to expand under Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, and by the 1956–7 school year, approximately 33% of children went to primary school and 9.5% to secondary.<sup>14</sup> In the years preceding the White Revolution, only half of the country's 7-year-olds entered school, and less than 10% of those entering elementary education graduated from high school.<sup>15</sup>

Under the Pahlavis, then, modern schooling expanded beyond the realms of urban elite circles, albeit gradually. However, this expansion hardly reached Iran's vast agricultural and nomadic periphery, and was evident mostly in the big cities. Indeed, in 1960, almost forty years after the coup d'état that brought the Pahlavi dynasty to power, less than 30% of Iranian school-aged children were in school.<sup>16</sup> In the rural and tribal regions, where most of the population lived, only 24% of children aged 6–10 years old went to school in 1961–2.<sup>17</sup> The expansion of the national education system continued most significantly from the second half of the 1960s following the White Revolution. Passing away in 1969, Āl-e Ahmad witnessed only the beginning of this period of rapid expansion, and the book, first published in 1958, is based on his earlier experiences.

The narrator belongs to a generation of educated Iranians who had already adopted the new approaches and practices regarding children and education, even – to an extent – criticizing modern schooling as it existed in Iran. However, Iranian society, including the government, had yet to follow suit in this regard. In the 1950s, most Iranian children were still living according to pre-industrial models of childhood – child labor and marriage were normative and fertility and infant mortality rates were high.<sup>18</sup> Reza Arasteh writes that, in 1955, the mortality rate was a staggering 40% for children under 15 years old in Tehran. In the rural areas, this rate was presumably even higher.<sup>19</sup> Under such circumstances, the promoters of modern models of childhood and education had to deal with parents, children, and community leaders who were unconvinced of the need for extended schooling, and with a government that, despite its modernist rhetoric, provided neither the necessary resources to expand schooling to the geographic and social peripheries nor proper employment for high school graduates. This was the backdrop to Āl-e Ahmad's experiences as a teacher and principal and, therefore, to the story.

<sup>14</sup> Ashraf, "Education: General Survey of Modern Education."

<sup>15</sup> Ayman, *Educational Innovation in Iran*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Menashri, *Education*, 192.

<sup>17</sup> Menashri, *Education*, 178.

<sup>18</sup> "Organisation of a Labour Inspection Service: Report Prepared for the Government of Iran," 17–18. According to the UN, fertility rates in Iran during the 1950s were over seven children per woman. See, United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "World Population Prospects: The 2022 Revision, Custom Data Acquired via Website."

<sup>19</sup> Arasteh, *Man and Society in Iran*, 133.

The book opens with the narrator's decision to quit his job as a teacher and become a school principal, and then surveys his actions at the school over the course of one academic year. The various chapters include his interactions with the school staff, community, parents, and various officials. Throughout the year, one of the principal's main concerns is securing enough funds to run the school properly and meet the students' needs. To this end, he turns to the local community and parents for support, as the Ministry of Education does not provide him with the necessary resources. In addition to securing the school's physical necessities, the book discusses pedagogical issues, such as forms of discipline (from caning to grading), the curriculum, and interactions with parents. Simultaneously, the principal manages the welfare of the staff, who deal with various disasters – an ailing mother, political arrest, and a car accident. Throughout the book, the principal continuously considers resigning, but repeatedly tears apart his letter of resignation after writing. He finally quits following an incident discussed later in this article.

When the narrator seeks the position of school principal, he does so in the belief that this will be an easier job than teaching. This belief is based on the assumption that the state will provide the resources necessary to running the school properly and the school's teaching and administrative staff will take care of day-to-day operations. On his very first day on the job, however, he realizes that the funding is inadequate and the staff are equally problematic. It dawns on him that, as a principal, he represents the state in the eyes of the school community and, as such, he is responsible for the children and staff:

I'd thought that in the *nāẓem* I had somebody to take care of the work and that a system had already been set up which required no interference on my part. But now I saw that it wasn't going to be that simple. If tomorrow one of them cracked another in the head and broke it, if one of them got run over by a car, if one of them fell off the porch, what on earth could I do?<sup>20</sup>

Once the state positioned itself as children's guardian, wresting control from parents and religious establishments, the school principal had to act the part of guardian. This understanding and commitment to the school and its community, which the narrator reluctantly accepts, are the driving forces behind his attempts to align his establishment with the principles of modern education, of which Āl-e Ahmad was certainly aware based on his training.

From the start of the story, the clash between the ideal of the state taking responsibility for schooling and the reality, in which it neglects this responsibility, is evident. The school building to which the narrator is assigned is a donation from a wealthy community member. This donation, the narrator suggests, was not so much an act of ideology, but more a smart business move. As parents must send their children to school, due to an act making education mandatory (passed in 1943), the donor assumes many families will want to live close to the new school, and thus the surrounding lands, which are also his property, will increase in value.<sup>21</sup> The state relies on donations from wealthy citizens rather than building and maintaining the country's schools from the state budget, but these wealthy citizens are not investing in the future of their communities and country as much as their own financial interests.

On his first tour of the grounds, the building's deteriorated condition becomes apparent. The principal's modern training is evident also in his criticism of the school environment. The courtyard pool is "the only part of the building plan that took children of all sizes and ages into consideration."<sup>22</sup> The bathrooms are completely inadequate and full of "signs" of children's fear of falling into the toilet hole, but the Ministry of Education refuses to fix

<sup>20</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 43–44.

<sup>21</sup> Āl-e Ahmad repeats this claim in Āl-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*, 87. As it pertains to the mandatory education act passed in 1943, see Menashri, *Education*, 173.

<sup>22</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 48.

them, as the government will not spend money on “someone else’s property.”<sup>23</sup> As mentioned, the school building was donated by a wealthy member of the community, not built by the government. To address this lack of resources, the principal resorts to various solutions – paying out of pocket for some of the school’s necessities (e.g., purchasing a samovar for the teachers’ room and fixing the water pump), obtaining free medical supplies from a student’s father, who is a doctor, and asking for donations from the local council and parents. He berates himself:

Now do you see, stupid? You became a school principal and you’ve got to wrap up your personal dignity and pride in tin foil and stow them inside your hat so that they don’t rot... Public servant! Damn the whole business!

The principal feels humiliated at having to gather monetary and equipment donations from the community in order to improve the school’s physical condition, but this humiliation is not merely a result of personal pride (discussed later in the article). This feeling also stems from the clash between the ideal, in which the state fulfills its role as guardian of children’s education and welfare, and the reality of the state shirking its duty, designating a school building as private property.

The principal’s belief that improved physical conditions are necessary for pupils to study properly is one example of his modern sensibilities. A recurring reformist criticism of the traditional *maktab* concerned the environment in which children learned. Dirty, unventilated, dark, and humid – the physical conditions of the *maktab* were considered symbolic of its educational ills. New ideas about children’s need for sunlight, fresh air, movement, and hygiene were central to modernist notions of children’s health and education.<sup>24</sup> Under the principal’s lead, many of the building’s deficiencies are repaired – doors are installed in the bathrooms, the courtyard is sanded, and the volleyball net and water pump are fixed. These renovations respond to children’s basic physical needs, such as hygiene, drinking, and movement. For the children themselves, the decision of whether or not to come and how long to remain in school was based not on the perception that their most appropriate pastime is schooling, but rather the physical comforts the school building offered, even more so after the principal renovated.

When the rains began, I ordered the stoves lit each morning from seven o’clock on. [...] The kids always came early. Even on the rainy days [...] I have no idea what it was at school that made them come with such enthusiasm, whatever it was, it certainly wasn’t education... They always came early. And as soon as they arrived, they gathered around the stoves and dried their givehs. A number of them even stayed at school through the lunch hour. I quickly discovered that their staying through the noon hour was caused by a shoe problem. Whoever had shoes didn’t stay.<sup>25</sup>

Alongside the lack of sufficient financial support from the government, it appears the local community is also not convinced of the need for a primary school for its children. The principal attempts to convince parents, most of whom are illiterate farmers, by resorting to religious language he does not believe in, and for which he ridicules himself: “What am I doing: [sic] Here I am citing God, the Prophet, and the Koran. That was when I stopped.”<sup>26</sup> However, the use of such religious arguments in favor of modern schooling or other aspects of modernization was an important mode of early reformist writings on education and science, in Iran and elsewhere. Intellectuals of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century based their support for modern

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>24</sup> Schayegh, “A Sound Mind Lives in a Healthy Body,” 170.

<sup>25</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 65–66.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 98.



education on religious edicts such as “The search for knowledge is the duty of every (male and female) believer” and “Search for knowledge, even if it is in China.” Supporters of modern education also stressed fathers’ religious duty to provide their sons with education in order to convince parents that schooling in the modern sense was the education required by religion.<sup>27</sup> However, for the narrator, who is already imbued with new perspectives that prioritize education as a fundamental element of childhood and crucial to the nation, the idea of having to persuade others of this imperative appears absurd. His underlying empathy for the parents forces him to overcome his distaste for religious argumentation and employ it in conversation with them.

A glaring example of the fact that parents have not adopted the new notions of childhood appears in the conversation between the principal and the father of a student caught stealing sugar cones from home and selling them at school. When the principal shows compassion toward the child’s actions, suggesting they might be a symptom of him not feeling at home in his own house (as the father divorced the student’s mother and remarried), the father answers that he expects the “young jackass” (*nareh khar*) to earn his living at this stage.<sup>28</sup> The “jackass” is a fourth-grade student, meaning a child approximately ten years old. Indeed, according to the standards of pre-industrial childhood, children in their early teens were already able to earn their keep, and doing a man’s job not much later. After elementary school, Āl-e Ahmad himself was taken out of school by his father and sent to work in the bazaar.<sup>29</sup> David Menashri points out that in rural areas, even in the mid-1970s, parents were only just becoming adjusted to the idea of allowing children to stay in school to the “late” age of nine or ten before using them as full-time workforce.<sup>30</sup>

Through his narrator, Āl-e Ahmad voices strong criticism of the state’s school curriculum and disciplinary measures. This criticism, prevalent among Iranian educators of Āl-e Ahmad’s time, shares much in common with earlier criticism of traditional education in the country. Claims of irrelevant subject matter, teacher violence, and unhygienic physical conditions were staples of modernist accusations against the *maktab*, now voiced against modern schools.<sup>31</sup> Iran’s changing social circumstances meant that the school, as envisioned in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was far less relevant in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. State schools in the 1950s served a much wider segment of the population than those of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which were primarily elite institutions. When only a few had the privilege of modern education, a position within the government bureaucracy was almost guaranteed. However, as student numbers multiplied, this type of education no longer ensured white-collar employment. Educationalists saw the need to reform the curriculum to help educate better-informed manual laborers, which clashed with the popular opinion of parents, who saw schooling as a way to liberate their children from such labor.<sup>32</sup>

If school curricula, teacher training, and buildings changed in the transition from the *maktab* to the new school, it seems that physical punishment died harder. Teachers and principals in the new schools were not supposed to use violence against students, but this remained a common method of discipline in many cases. While the principal’s rejection of physical punishment as a form of discipline is evident from the book’s early chapters and reminiscent of early criticisms of Iran’s traditional system of education, later chapters expose his rejection of modern methods of discipline as well. Mostly, he criticizes grading and exams for the fear they instill in students, a fear that will remain into adulthood, making them passive and fearful citizens. As Āl-e Ahmad writes in *Gharbzadegi*, they become

<sup>27</sup> Balslev, *Iranian Masculinities*, 60–62; Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution*, 190–92.

<sup>28</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *Iranian Society*, 14.

<sup>30</sup> Menashri, *Education*, 182.

<sup>31</sup> Balslev, *Iranian Masculinities*, 78–83.

<sup>32</sup> Menashri, *Education*, 171; Arasteh, *Education and Social Awakening*, 69–71; Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*.

“purposeless tools of the government; all of them are accommodating, cowardly, and useless!”<sup>33</sup>

A first hint of this is found in the principal’s comment when first entering the exercise hall, as he imagines that he can still smell the sweat shed by students during exams (rather than from physical exercise). A more detailed criticism is voiced in Chapter 15, where the narrator explicitly states that exams replaced caning as a tool of discipline. It is the teacher’s right to beat children, he writes, since they themselves were once children beaten by their teachers, “and if we broke their switches, they had to hit with grades.”<sup>34</sup> Grading students’ deportment is similarly not to his liking, since “All you need to know is how to bow and obey.”<sup>35</sup> For him, these methods of discipline, much like earlier ones, create frightened children and future docile adults. Indeed, he asserts:

These men of tomorrow were going to be so frightened by these classes and these examinations and their brains and their nerves so frayed by terror that by the time they had their diplomas and their degrees, they really would be a new breed of men. Men full of fear. Paper bags full of fear and anxiety. When a person is a teacher, he doesn’t notice such things because the other side, the party he is dealing with, is hostile. You have to be a principal, meaning you have to be at the edge of the abyss, eyes fixed everyday [sic], every month, on the arrayal of troops, teachers on the one hand, students on the other, in order to understand what that sheet of paper called a diploma or a degree really means. It certifies that the owner of this sheet of paper was subject to the pressure of fear for twelve or fifteen full years, four to ten times every year, and that his sole motivating force was fear, fear, and more fear.<sup>36</sup>

This criticism is often voiced by researchers of education in Iran, who point to the fact that the Pahlavi system of education was meant to create obedient bureaucrats rather than critical and involved citizens. Paradoxically, education was also cited as a threshold requirement for the formation of democracy in Iran. The shah claimed that as long as the Iranian population remained uneducated and uninformed about what democracy entailed, the country was better off under autocratic rule. However, the Iranian system of education purposefully depoliticized young people.<sup>37</sup> In *Gharbzadegi*, written in 1962 as a report to the Council on the Educational Goals of Iran, Āl-e Ahmad revisits this criticism. For him, education could and should solve the problems described in the book, but the Iranian system betrays its purpose by not creating the country’s future leadership:

...the goal of our educational system should not and cannot be to produce regimented, conforming people who will look like being [sic] all cut from the same cloth, so that they will tolerate the status quo and accommodate it. Especially for us, a people who live in times of change and crisis and during a period of social transition. We will be able to stand the burden of all these changes and crises only with the help of self-sacrificing and principled individuals (who in popular argot of psychology are called “non-conforming, pig-headed, and unstable”). Only with their help will we be able to cure the kinds of social disorders described in this book.

[...]

What is needed is the democratization of the country’s leadership, a way to free it from the monopoly of certain individuals or families [...] In this age we need men with strong

<sup>33</sup> Molayi, Mahmudi, and Zahrazadeh, “Naqd-e Farhangi-ye Roman-e Modir-e Madrased-ye Jalal Al-e Ahmad zz Manzar-e Gofteman va Nazariyeh-ye Qodrat-e Michel Foucault,” 87; Āl-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*.

<sup>34</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *Modir-e Madrased*, 117 (author’s translation).

<sup>35</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 118.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>37</sup> Nafisi, “Education, the State and the Cultural Crisis in Iran during the Pahlavi Period, 1925–1979: A Critical Evaluation,” 95; Kashani-Sabet, *Frontier Fictions*, 195; Matthee, “Transforming Dangerous Nomads,” 334–35.



wills and principles; men who are specialists and uncompromising. We do not need the west-stricken men we described above, nor do we need men who are storehouses of human knowledge or who are jacks-of-all-trades and masters of none, or men who are merely good, obedient, or congenial, compromising and pleasing all and sundry.<sup>38</sup>

In a way, the patriarchal-hierarchical nature of the school reproduces and reasserts the patriarchal nature of the Iranian monarchy under the Pahlavis, with the shah as the Crowned Father. In his 1964 book on Iranian society, Reza Arasteh makes a similar claim about the relationship between fathers and sons in Iran: “In the process of socialization the child acquires a personality admirably suited to the vicissitudes of Persian life. His father’s arbitrary and authoritative measures reflect, in miniature, the policies of the government and those in administrative positions.”<sup>39</sup> If, as some scholars suggest, the school in the novella is an allegory for Iran itself, then the violence used to instill submissiveness in the students is symbolic of the violence used by the regime.<sup>40</sup> The principal’s attempt to create a school not based on fear and violence can be seen as an attempt to create a regime of governmentality, which rejects the use of fear and violence as tools of governance. This attempt is futile, though. Despite his kind behavior toward children, the abolishment of physical punishment, and the demonstrable care given to their needs, the students still fear him: “Even though the nāzem had broken the switches, his fear of me, the principal, of the nāzem, of the school, and of the punishment which was surely to come had remained intact.”<sup>41</sup> The principal’s ultimate failure to avoid violence might suggest the inevitable failure of an authoritarian-patriarchal regime trying to present itself as caring and compassionate.

Modern schools’ depoliticization of young Iranians was in line with the tenets of modern childhood dictating children’s detachment from politics, often under the pretext of protecting them from adult responsibilities and cares. However, this was not always the approach in Iran. During the Constitutional Revolution of 1905–11, schoolchildren were actively involved in demonstrations, sit-ins, and violent clashes, and lauded for this involvement. Even in Āl-e Ahmad’s novella, some political activity was present at the school, albeit by the staff and not the students: the former principal and some teachers were arrested for communist activity. The Pahlavi desire to create a loyalist citizen body went hand in hand with the broad depoliticization of children. While Āl-e Ahmad criticizes the creation of politically passive adults, he never addresses the paradox of how to educate political adults while depoliticizing children.

The narrator voices another common progressive criticism against the French-inspired school system in Iran: he is not pleased with the curriculum, which, in his opinion, lacks the practical subjects that will prepare students for the job market beyond government positions.<sup>42</sup> He is averse to teaching Persian in the way it is taught and, for this reason, quits his job as a teacher. He also ridicules attempts at offering more practical subjects by teaching handicrafts. Neither the memorized knowledge of Persian, geography, and history nor the childish handicraft projects done at school will offer children real gains in their adult lives:

Nowadays, every child had to learn some kind of skill, craft, trade, or industrial art [...] so that if nothing should come from all their framed diplomas on the wall, at least their cupboard wouldn’t be bare, and they wouldn’t die of starvation. What then could be better than a handicrafts program? [...] Yet, for every thousand people, you’re lucky to find one good enough to open a frame-making shop, or do inlaying work, or exchange his

<sup>38</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi*.

<sup>39</sup> Arasteh, *Man and Society in Iran*, 142.

<sup>40</sup> Molāyi, Mahmudi, and Zahrāzādeh, “Naqd-e Farhangi-ye Romān-e Modir-e Madrseh-ye Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad az Manzar-e Gofte-man va Nazariyeh-ye Qodrat-e Michel Foucault,” 79–80.

<sup>41</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 78.

<sup>42</sup> Bonenfant-Juwong, “Teacher-Technicians,” 988–89.

jigsaw for a hacksaw, nuts and bolts, and an adjustable wrench. God bless the father of this educational system, with its handicraft program so successful in increasing the number of sidewalk spice sellers, its grades in deportment, its left face-right face march, and all the borders and lakes of the world; and the exports of Ethiopia to be memorized.<sup>43</sup>

This criticism of the French model of education, according to which Iranian state schools were developed, was common to other societies in the interwar and immediate post-war years. The educational ideology promoting “education for real life,” as Sara Pursley shows, reached the Middle East through American education experts and local students who studied in the United States (often earning advanced degrees in education) or attended missionary schools.<sup>44</sup> In Iran in the 1950s, both educators and American advisors voiced similar criticism of the education system and pushed for experimentation with American-inspired models and methods.<sup>45</sup> Education policymakers such as Isā Sadiq (Iran’s minister of education under Mohammad Reza Shah) were among those who earned doctorates from American universities and were influenced by ideas popular in the US at the time.<sup>46</sup> According to teacher, writer, and social critic Samad Behrangi, whom Āl-e Ahmad considered a “younger brother,” the Teachers’ Training College in Tabriz treated the teaching of John Dewey as “divine revelation.”<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, this approach was evident in schools of the American Mission, in which many of the country’s decision-makers studied. Ironically, Āl-e Ahmad, known for his acerbic criticism of American influence on Iranian society, voices an American-inspired attitude to education.

Faced with difficulties from the government, community, and staff, the principal is positioned as the spokesperson for new approaches to children and education. He sees himself as a representative of new scientific and moral views regarding children and their place in society, and, as a result, how education should look and a school should be run. This supports the image of the enlightened intellectual facing both a retrograde society and a corrupt government. The next part of this article examines how the narrator himself is, in fact, deeply steeped in a social structure that holds him back from fully realizing new and progressive notions of education and childhood at his school.

### The school as a patriarchal household

While patriarchy is not explicitly mentioned in the novella, it underlies the narrator’s understanding of his role as head of the school. As he takes over the school, the principal becomes the patriarch of the school “household,” a patron in charge of and responsible to both teachers and students. This position, with its gendered overtones, is evident from the novella’s first pages, when the narrator, on first seeing the school building, tells himself: “if you’re a man, use your brains and become principal of this very school.”<sup>48</sup> As principal, he takes on this responsibility but attempts to avoid using physical or verbal violence, a prerogative of the patriarch, and thus establish a benevolent patriarchal household.<sup>49</sup> As noted by Ghoreishian, the relationships between the principal and the school’s staff reveal a hierarchy of masculinities, and the narrator’s lack of confidence in his ability to fulfill the role of the dominant male patriarch and assert his authority.<sup>50</sup> The system in which he operates does not enable him to fulfill the obligations of a benevolent patriarch without giving in to

<sup>43</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 118.

<sup>44</sup> Pursley, *Familiar Futures*, 88.

<sup>45</sup> Ashraf, “Education: General Survey of Modern Education.”

<sup>46</sup> Zirinsky, “A Panacea for the Ills of the Country: American Presbyterian Education in Inter-War Iran,” 167–68; Schayegh, “Sport, Health, and the Iranian Middle Class,” 361.

<sup>47</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *Iranian Society*, 136; Quoted in Hillmann, *Major Voices in Contemporary Persian Literature*, 200.

<sup>48</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 38.

<sup>49</sup> Khalilinejad and Ardakani, “Principal or Father?,” 598.

<sup>50</sup> Ghoreishian, “Mirrors of Society,” 317–19.

bribery, flattery, hypocrisy, and, eventually, the violence he abhors and struggles to avoid. According to critic Reza Barahani, this ambivalent approach to patriarchy was also characteristic of Āl-e Ahmad himself. Barahani, a friend and follower of Āl-e Ahmad, saw him as someone who tried to escape patriarchy throughout his life, only to become a patriarch much like his father later in life.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, once the narrator sees the school as a patriarchal household, the children's needs and interests become secondary to those of adults. According to Arasteh, patriarchal norms were still the rule among the majority of Iranian families in the early 1960s, with only a minority of middle and upper-class urban families adopting "Western practices."<sup>52</sup> In this regard, as long as the principal ascribes to the roles and rules of patriarchy, he cannot fully "convert" to modern views of children, which position them as the most important (though not the most powerful) members of the household. Adult demands – of the staff, the community, and the state – will always take precedence over those of children. The principal is therefore mirroring Iranians' gradual and partial acceptance of modern childhood. Much like the education system and the state, he adopts the language of modern childhood and even progressive criticism of the current education system, but when it comes to practicalities, Iran and the principal are both still straddling this divide. The state does not give the education system the resources it needs, and the principal is still enmeshed within a worldview that sees children as secondary and subservient to adults. This position, in a way, is characteristic of Āl-e Ahmad's ideological complexity. He is often described as torn between the two worlds of Shia Islam and modern western thought, being critical of both.<sup>53</sup>

Alongside the sense of responsibility, the principal feels fatherly compassion, pity, and commitment toward the children. As Soraya Tremayne argues, using Suad Joseph's term "patriarchal connectivity," this type of fatherhood, which links authority and control to care and love, is quite evident among Iranian families even today.<sup>54</sup> In his first meeting with the students, as he notes their poverty and discomfort, the principal finds himself unable to think of what to tell them, finally saying: "the new principal, meaning me, really had wished to have one of them for his own offspring, but now that he had all of them he wasn't quite sure how to proceed."<sup>55</sup> This quote is emblematic of the patriarchal nature of the school, the role of principal, and the narrator's confusion and uncertainty regarding this role. Given Āl-e Ahmad's childlessness and infertility, this statement takes on additional meaning, pointing to the author's desire to become a father and fractured masculinity.<sup>56</sup> But, as this speech elicits giggles and laughter from the children, it dawns on him that, despite his years of experience as a teacher, he needs to have a special language (*zabān-e khāsi*) to establish contact with children, meaning he accepts the notion that children are almost a separate ethnos, including their own language.<sup>57</sup> This perception, to an extent, is the result of the modern concept of childhood, which views children as radically different from adults. Due to the miscommunication between the principal and the children, he tries to eavesdrop on their conversations:

I surprised them at the corner of the school wall, hoping that from overhearing a half-finished insult or an uncompleted sentence I might be able to at least guess at their

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Hillmann, *Iranian Culture: A Pesianist View*, 134.

<sup>52</sup> Arasteh, *Man and Society in Iran*, 145.

<sup>53</sup> Mirsepassi, *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization: Negotiating Modernity in Iran*, 98–99; Matin-Asgari, *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity*, 179–81; Dabashi, "Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran," 43.

<sup>54</sup> Tremayne, *Inconceivable Iran: To Reproduce or Not to Reproduce?*, 70.

<sup>55</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 43.

<sup>56</sup> According to Hamid Dabashi, Āl-e Ahmad's lack of biological ability to father a child was a driving force behind his social activism. Dabashi, "Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran."

<sup>57</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *Modir-e Madraseh*, 16.

inner thoughts and feelings. But, they continued to run along on their way without even a hello.<sup>58</sup>

The lack of a common language, or indeed of any language, is one characteristic of the children in the novella. The lack of speech is evidence of how the principal and Āl-e Ahmad see children: not as full human beings, as individuals, but rather as “human becomings,” devoid of the ability to speak, the quintessential human trait.

The principal (and, arguably, Āl-e Ahmad) is part of the patriarchal fabric of Iranian society at the time and the patriarchal nature of the institute of the modern school. This nature dictates a patronizing approach to children, whether benevolent or violent, that keeps children marginalized. Alongside this approach, the principal also adopts new ideas regarding children that marginalize them in a different way, by seeing them as passive and voiceless. Thus, despite children’s changing status in the move from a gerontocratic to a neontocratic society, their powerlessness remains a constant.

Children in the story are nearly always victims, and almost never speak. The text recreates the children’s passivity by keeping their voices muted. They are victims of the school staff, their families, poverty, or the country’s negligence.<sup>59</sup> The principal witnesses acts of child agency in the face of adult injustice, such as during a beating, when an older child manages to remove his hand swiftly and evade the vice-principal’s switch, or in response to a father’s ill-treatment (as in the case of stealing sugar cones mentioned previously). Khalilinejad and Ardakani’s discourse analysis of the story, however, exposes that the children are the least activated, most impersonalized characters.<sup>60</sup> Their characteristics relegate them to the world of animals (such as in the case of the boy with a cat’s face) or inanimate objects (such as the molested child described as a wind-up doll). These descriptions are often compassionate, and the principal’s most prevalent feeling toward the children is pity. Furthermore, throughout the novella, children’s bodies are the focus of attention and compassion, rather than their completeness as human beings with desires, characters, and agency. The principal seeks to protect children’s bodies from injury – by adults, the natural and built environments, and other children – but does not see them as individuals. Such a stance is in line with the modern concept of children as dependent, passive, and in need of constant adult protection. It creates a clear power dynamic between savior and saved, protector and protected, which allows for children’s disenfranchisement, supposedly for their own good and safety.

The principal’s attempt to abolish physical punishment in the school is an example of his struggle with patriarchal notions. Traditionally, inflicting violence as a form of discipline was considered normative, legitimate, and even beneficial to some extent. As previously mentioned, this form of punishment, which was prevalent in the *maktab* (and in families), came under severe attack by the promoters of modern education. In modern schools, teachers, vice-principals, and principals were not supposed to hit children or verbally abuse them. New forms of discipline were to replace physical punishment: grading, surveillance, and punishments that played on the student’s sense of shame or were rational and proportional to the offense.<sup>61</sup> However, as can be seen in the book, adult violence toward children was still prevalent in many schools. On his very first day, the principal witnesses a teacher verbally abusing a student. In this incident, the teacher justifies himself, saying that the children “just can’t comprehend kindness. They need a bump in the head.”<sup>62</sup> The principal asks the teacher to forgive the child “for his sake.”

The fourth chapter opens when the principal reaches the school on his third day and hears children crying as the vice-principal canes them.

<sup>58</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 93–94.

<sup>59</sup> Rostami and Molabeygi, “Tabyin-e Bazahdideghi-ye Kudakan dar Dastan-e ‘Modir-e Madrased’ az Manzar-e Aamuzesh-ha-ye Bazahdideh Shenasaneh.”

<sup>60</sup> Khalilinejad and Ardakani, “Principal or Father?,” 596–99.

<sup>61</sup> Balslev, *Iranian Masculinities*, 78–81.

<sup>62</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 47–48.

The children were pleading and wailing. But they stuck their hands out anyway. They were accustomed to it [...]. One of them was so tiny I doubted whether the switch could even hit his hand. Aiming at such a hand was impossible; and, for sure, the birch was going to land on his fingertips. Ouch! [...] I knew how much that stung. Or else on the wrist [...] I was about to shout at the *nāzem* or kick him and push him out of the way.<sup>63</sup>

The principal's first emotional response is empathy for the children and a desire to yell at or kick the vice-principal. However, something in the children's eyes causes him to restrain himself, merely asking the vice-principal to forgive the children "on his behalf." The sight of the vice-principal caning students causes the principal to flinch with sympathy. He remembers being punished that way himself, and his empathy for the youngest student is clear. The hand becomes metonymical of the student, and his catlike face a symbol of muteness and helplessness. It is obvious that both teachers and students in the school considered public caning such as this to be an everyday occurrence. Modern educators, though, upended this approach, claiming that physically abusing children was both counter-productive and morally and politically wrong; children should be protected from adult violence.

Following this incident, the principal speaks with the vice-principal and gently scolds him, saying that he might do real damage to the children. The vice-principal retorts: "If just one day you neglect to keep them in line, they'll climb all over you."<sup>64</sup> This is reminiscent of the argument voiced by the teacher who verbally attacked a child, believing children are in need of constant, harsh discipline if they are to be kept "in line." To a degree, the teacher and vice-principal view children as inherently wicked, and the relationship between pupils and teachers as one of enmity, dominance, and resistance (as shown in the quote above portraying the principal as a spectator surveying the assembled troops of children and teachers). Unlike them, the principal views children as basically innocent and weak, in need of protection. When he once again remembers the caning scene, the urge to answer violence with violence resurfaces:

But that little boy's hand had been so tiny, his face so much like a cat's; and he had shed such tears that honestly I'd come within an inch of smashing the *nāzem* in the mouth and breaking his switch into little pieces over his head.<sup>65</sup>

When the vice-principal and principal speak, the power dynamics remind the principal of those between him and the students (and between household servant and master); the vice-principal's superfluous use of the honorific title *Aqā* is similar to the children's manner of speech – "like a school boy, he addressed me as *Aqā* in every sentence."<sup>66</sup> Fearing conflict with and a possible comeback from the vice-principal, the narrator turns to a different tactic and imparts his memories of being beaten as a student. Tellingly, one story is about a principal who slapped him twice (*do tā keshideh*), mirroring the principal's own desire to slap the vice-principal twice.<sup>67</sup> The two traumatic childhood memories of being wrongly punished help explain the principal's disdain for violence as a form of discipline. His reaction to this incident encapsulates the inner struggle – against the violence inherent in the patriarchal institutions of Iranian society – that haunts the narrator throughout the story. The sanctioned violence of the patriarch targets the weaker elements of society: children, people of lower social standing, and women. The tendency toward violence exists in the principal,

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>67</sup> *Āl-e Ahmad, Modir-e Madraseh*, 32–33.

but he struggles to control it and substitute the patriarch's violent authority with the softer authority of words.

Although the vice-principal dutifully breaks his canes, physical punishment creeps back into the school. In the first instance, the father of one of the students, upon hearing that the school no longer uses physical punishment, ties up and has the vice-principal cane his own son. Tellingly, this father is a policeman, a representative of the authoritarian state's law enforcement arm. As Āl-e Ahmad writes, "After all, he had policeman written all over his face. [...] He'd recognized the tools of his trade [the whip] to be among the necessities of creation [...]"<sup>68</sup> Later in the narrative, the principal tells of the return of caning by the vice-principal, a behavior he now feels unable to stop.<sup>69</sup>

The conversation between the principal and vice-principal is the second time the principal restrains an angry or violent reaction within himself. A day earlier, he had wanted to scold teachers who were late for class, but instead spoke pleasantly with them. In both cases, the mild approach proved fruitful: the teachers came on time the following day and the vice-principal broke the switches used to beat students. A health department doctor's visit to the school raises a similar violent urge within the principal. When he sees the brusque manner in which the doctor treats children's eyes, the principal comments that, if he were to be treated this way, he would slap the doctor. The principal's first failure to contain his violent urges leads to the first drafting of his resignation letter. After refusing to cheat and sign a receipt for a greater amount of coal than the school received, he yells at the vice-principal and curses. This burst of verbal abuse is followed by several hours of writing and tearing up his letter of resignation. Michael Hillman commented that "the work seems to suffer from a basic flaw in the characterization of the protagonist and narrator of the action." His attempts to control his violent urges may give the main character this type of psychological depth.<sup>70</sup>

As the patriarch of the school, the principal is obliged to take care of the household necessities. In addition to renovating the built environment, the principal also takes another step to improve conditions in the school by providing students with proper winter clothes; an act stemming from the realization that children who do not have the most basic physical necessities, such as protection against the winter elements, will not continue their schooling. The attention Āl-e Ahmad pays to children's physical needs and, by way of metaphor, the socioeconomic conditions affecting education is further proof of his empathy and compassion. The issue of footwear first arises when the principal blames the children's shoes for their constant falling and getting injured at school.<sup>71</sup> Later on, he comments on how the matter of shoes (*giveh*, more specifically, the traditional Iranian cloth shoes) and efforts to keep them clean and dry controls the daily routines of both students and teachers:

Before experiencing all of this, I had read reams of nonsense about the basic elements of child training and education—about certain fundamentals like having a good teacher, clean toilets, blackboards, erasers, and a thousand other things. [...] But here, very simply, the fundamental and primary element was shoes and shoes alone. *Givehs* become heavy in water and if you go too fast they stick in the mud and your feet come right out of them.<sup>72</sup>

Shoes make another appearance in a scene that demonstrates the gendered aspect of the school as a patriarchal household. When a female teacher is sent to work at the school and enquires whether there are other female teachers working there, the principal replies:

<sup>68</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 75.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>70</sup> Hillmann, "Al-e Ahmad's Fictional Legacy," 249–51.

<sup>71</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *Modir-e Madraseh*, 37.

<sup>72</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 66.



“Unfortunately [...] the road to our school wasn’t built for ladies’ high-heeled shoes.”<sup>73</sup> This lack of accessibility is but a metaphor for the school’s “overly masculine” nature. While the principal toys with the idea of hiring this teacher, sexist notions regarding the possible complications of having a woman at the school cause him to dissuade her from joining. The entrance of an educated, professional woman to the male domain of the school seems too disruptive, even for the narrator’s liberal sensitivities.

Children’s hands draw the principal’s attention once again, but not due to the injuries suffered from caning this time, but to those caused by the cold: “if frozen, frost-bitten hands cannot even use crude instruments like shovels or planes which fill up the whole hand, how can they possibly be expected to manipulate pencils?”<sup>74</sup> Once again, damaged hands stand as a metonym for the student, and the metaphor is clear – poverty prevents children from benefitting from education.<sup>75</sup> The narrator also suggests that the children’s biological fathers, “undoubtedly prolific progenitors all, and hence overburdened with offspring,” do not care for their sons’ wellbeing.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, he steps into their place, making children’s needs his concern. Given Āl-e Ahmad’s infertility, his bitterness toward neglectful fathers of numerous children – neglectful due to poverty and ignorance – may also stem from his frustration at his own childlessness.

However, the fact that the government will not provide funds to help the students and the principal must thus beg wealthy members of the community for assistance deeply injures his pride. As the guardian of the school and representative of the government, he proves unable to fulfill his role. Like a father who cannot support his family and resorts to begging, the principal is disgusted by his own weakness. Even when the act of begging is successful, and the children receive new clothes, heated classrooms, and a sanded courtyard, and he himself gains the respect and gratitude of the women of the community, he still feels like a failure. It is the failure of the state reflected in his failure as its representative. As Āl-e Ahmad writes, “The beggar’s bread had bedecked education in a new suit of clothes.”<sup>77</sup>

Alongside its open criticism of exams, grades, and violence, the novella offers a more personal and reflexive criticism of the impact these methods have on teachers and the narrator. What tortures the narrator and makes him feel unworthy, “even of the job of a school principal,” is not merely the Pahlavi state’s educational policies and his inability to break the cycle of violence, but also his inability to feel empathy for the children as they face exams and grading. This new method of discipline makes teachers and students rivals fighting over grades. The narrator relates that, being a teacher for ten years meant,

I couldn’t identify enough with a child’s mind to be able to comprehend that fear and that terror, and hence, I wasn’t able to feel any sympathy. Ten years of teaching and giving out all kinds of low grades had turned my heart to stone.<sup>78</sup>

Amusing them with humorous stories of his own teachers, who became ill whenever they gave top grades, he tries to convince the teachers to give students better grades and the students that their teachers are reasonable in their grading. But eventually, he is aware of both the futility of his attempts and how he himself has been irrevocably changed by the system. The principal is a product of the system, as both a student and teacher, and tries to fight the violence and apathy the system has created in him.

The narrator’s reflexivity and social sensibility are also evident when he says that he caught himself treating children differently according to their socioeconomic background.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>75</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *Modir-e Madraseh*, 49–50.

<sup>76</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 66.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 73–74.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 121.

Stemming from his rejection of social injustice and witnessing of the hardships poorer students face during their studies, he unconsciously tries to ameliorate the situation by judging poor children less harshly than their wealthy counterparts.

I just then realized that from the beginning of the year until now we had been judging all of the children solely on the basis of their father's financial situations, just like this Colonel's son who, because of the weight of his father's position, never studied a lick. I saw now that in all the time I had been here the students whose fathers weren't well off seemed to me to be the smarter ones, the more educable, and the more eager. Those whose fathers were in the chips were slower learners, more stupid, more phlegmatic, and more discouraging. [...] It seems that I had prejudged all the children.<sup>79</sup>

While poor students attract his pity and sympathy, he feels instinctive and unjustified disdain toward the sons of wealthy families, who he considers spoiled, good for nothing, and totally passive. When first mentioning the issue of children's shoes, he comments: "Those who did [have good quality shoes] were all mama's boys who didn't know how to run or in some cases even walk."<sup>80</sup> When a fifth-grade teacher gives a student pornographic photos to paste on plywood and the student's father comes to school to complain, the principal thinks, "his child was one of those spoiled brats who never take a drink of water without first asking their parents" permission.<sup>81</sup> The son of a wealthy man, who wants to transfer his son to the school mid-year, is described as "one of those yellow skinned, lifeless kids you have to beg and cajole before cramming their morning milk and jam down their throats."<sup>82</sup> If we return to the analysis of the novella as an allegory for Iranian society, then Āl-e Ahmad's leftist bias in favor of the working classes and against the elite, who he sees as passive and spineless, is clear.

The author's social sensitivity, which makes clear to him the difficulties faced by poor children as they are legally required to attend school, prevents him, to an extent, from seeing children's inherent weakness regardless of social class. Whereas the power relations between rich and poor are resisted and criticized, those between children and adults are naturalized and taken for granted. For him, the sons of better-off families are always spoiled and submissive "mama's boys."<sup>83</sup> Once he understands the injustice of such an approach, he reflects on his tendency to consider poor boys to be brighter and better behaved than wealthy boys, regardless of their actual traits. He considers this an unconscious mechanism of affirmative action taken against the more common bias in favor of wealthy students, but also acknowledges the injustice of such assumptions.

The story's climax arrives when the principal is exposed to an incident that breaks his resolve not to use violence against children. The incident, in which two boys are caught in a sexual act and the degree of consent is unclear, also clashes with the narrator's ideas of what a child is. If the incident was consensual, then the two boys (one of whom is a fifth-grade student, meaning ten or eleven years old) were (homo)sexually active and therefore not innocent or naïve. If the incident was one of sexual abuse, however, then a child played the part of the aggressor, molesting another child. This in itself clashes with the sentiment of the principal, who, throughout the novella, sees children as the innocent victims of adults.

The father of the molested child enters the principal's office, accusing him of failing in his duties, as the boy was defiled under the principal's guard, thus ruining the family's honor.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

The police are notified when, after the parents take the child to a medical examiner, anal penetration is proven. Although the principal is enraged with the father, he nonetheless severely beats the molesting boy, who is then sent home. Following this eruption of violence, the principal is certain that he will be put on trial for the beating. When the day of the trial arrives, however, the magistrate says merely, "This was nothing but a trifle. It's solved now. We didn't want to cause you any trouble...." Following this, the principal finally resigns.<sup>84</sup>

Childhood sexuality is one of the taboos of modern childhood. Children are regarded as sexually pure, naïve, and innocent. However, in Iranian society of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, children of both genders were legitimate objects of adult male sexual desire and were sexually active. Child marriage was a common practice, and prepubescent boys (*amrad*) were symbols of divine beauty and entered erotic relationships with adult men. A hint of this different approach to childhood sexuality appears both in the first pages of the story as well as following the climax. The narrator's decision to quit teaching and become a principal seems suspicious to his surroundings, and he surmises that people must think of him as mentally ill or a pedophile (*bachcheh bāz*) who, assumedly, was found to molest students. Teachers' molestation of boys was a phenomenon common enough in Iran in the 1950s–1960s for Samad Behrangi to include it in the preface to his known tract about the problems of education in Iran.<sup>85</sup> Abbas Milani comments that such occurrences also happened in his school days.<sup>86</sup> The fact that a teacher found it permissible to give one of the students pornography is another example of an approach that does not necessarily accept the taboo of children and sexuality. The principal, voicing an opinion not so different to that of Behrangi, believes that sending single male teachers to remote peripheral schools where the salaries are too low for them to marry makes such behaviors understandable, almost unavoidable.<sup>87</sup>

Following the principal's violent attack on the child accused of assaulting his peer, he feels ashamed of his reaction. The narrator berates himself, justifying the child's sexual urges as ignited by spring and hormones, suffocated by the fact that he cannot play with girls his age, and unreleased by masturbation:

A school in the middle of nowhere or, for that matter, anywhere, in the spring season, when a kid's piss has started to foam, if you're the principal or some other donkey is—what difference does it make? This kid probably can't even play with his female cousins. All the girls in his family probably have to cover themselves from the time they reach ten or twelve years old...Stupid little savage. Your piss has started making foam. Why don't you go jerk off like everyone else, instead of messing around with little boys...?<sup>88</sup>

This monologue shows that the principal believes children to be sexual subjects as early as primary school. This belief is in accordance with the traditional view of children, but clashes with the modern perception of children's sexual purity.

Once we understand the role of the principal as patriarch, his reaction to the incident can be understood in terms of violence meant to protect family honor. This is the main argument of the father of the abused child, that his son lost his honor (*nāmus*) and it is the patriarch's role to punish the perpetrator, restoring family honor. While the principal tries to resolve other instances in the story without resorting to violence, modern sensibilities regarding children's sexual innocence converge with traditional sensibilities regarding honor in this instance, pushing him over the edge.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>85</sup> Hillmann, *Major Voices in Contemporary Persian Literature*, 203–4.

<sup>86</sup> Milani, *Tales of Two Cities*, 31–32.

<sup>87</sup> Ghoreishian, "Mirrors of Society," 319.

<sup>88</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 131–32.

This incident, like others in the book, was likely grounded in Āl-e Ahmad's experiences. In his autobiographical book *A Stone on a Grave*, which focuses mainly on his ruminations about his own infertility, Āl-e Ahmad refers to the incident in passing. When discussing the severe repercussions of the various treatments he underwent for his ailment, Āl-e Ahmad writes that he felt as if he was losing his sanity in those years, and this was the backdrop against which he "hit two individuals with the intent to kill: once, a mule of a student—when I was *the school principal*."<sup>89</sup> Āl-e Ahmad's failure to become a father is thus intertwined with his failure to become a benevolent patriarch of the school, or, as seen by the parents of the penetrated boy, his failure to guard the *nāmus* of his household. When, after beating the child, the principal learns that the child's father is the director of the bus company, his regret evaporates and he justifies the beating:

It was then that I realized I had beaten someone who really had deserved it. With the blows of my fists and feet over every single part of his body, I had uprooted, torn out, and cast aside all the effects of his pampered upbringing and twenty-four-hour-a-day gluttony.<sup>90</sup>

This incident is equally about the loss of children's bodily integrity. The penetrated child's body was violated by both his peer and the medical examiner, and the second child is severely beaten by the principal himself. None of this is being punished by the system, which proves indifferent to children's physical wellbeing. The narrator awaits his trial and punishment for beating a child, but neither arrives. The incident is swept under the rug, silenced, with no repercussions. This, I believe, is the breaking point at which the principal finally decides to resign. Understanding that the system will not protect children, even in severe circumstances, makes him unwilling to continue to take part. In a manner similar to that of the patriarchal household, it is the ruling adult's interest that governs the system's decisions. School is, in fact, a dangerous place for children rather than a safe haven, thus an educator who sees his role as protecting children cannot do so properly in the Iranian system of education.<sup>91</sup>

The inner conflicts around violence and patriarchy characterizing the novella expose its readers to more than just Āl-e Ahmad's personal psyche. Such conflicts represent Iranian society's engagement with novel concepts and practices of childhood, concepts that often clash with established norms and ideals. Children's changing status in society, and the new routines espoused by modern concepts of childhood, challenged established hierarchies and the Pahlavi state's plans for its future citizens. Living and working in the midst of this cultural shift, Āl-e Ahmad's work exposes the strains faced by both promoters of this shift and its opponents. The school principal, in this author's opinion, is therefore not lacking in psychological depth. At the conscious level, he moves between cynicism and compassion, despair and activism, agonizing over the limits of his influence over both students and staff. At the unconscious level, he demonstrates the conflicts of a man living under the aegis of one social construct – patriarchy – while working to erect an opposing order, that of modern childhood.

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<sup>89</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *A Stone on a Grave*, 46.

<sup>90</sup> Āl-e Ahmad, *The School Principal*, 132.

<sup>91</sup> See a criminologist analysis of the story, claiming that the school described in it fits Routine Activity Theory of crime. Rostami and Molabeygi, "Tabyin-e Bazahdidehgi-ye Kudakan dar Dastan-e 'Modir-e Madraseh' az Manzar-e Aamuzesh-ha-ye Bazahdideh Shenasaneh."

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