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# BETWEEN THE VISUAL AND THE VERBAL: AN AESTHETIC OF OPEN WOUNDS IN POST-TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE OF THE IRAN- IRAQ WAR (1980-1988)

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AN AESTHETIC OF OPEN WOUNDS  
IN  
POST-TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE OF THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR (1980-1988)**

A Dissertation Presented

by

MARYAM GHODRATI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2021

Comparative Literature

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## **DEDICATION**

**To my family**

**and**

**to all the bodies in pain.**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Moira Inghilleri, for her thoughtful, compassionate, and patient guidance and positive support. Together her friendship, humility, and selfless contribution to my professional advancement have been invaluable. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the members of my committee, Jim Hicks, Nil Santiáñez, and Paul Sprachman for their helpful comments and suggestions.

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A Special thanks to H.D, a civilian woman permanently wounded by chemical bombardment of her village, for sharing with me her dairies of pain and opening her heart and sharing her world of suffering. It inspired me throughout this research.

**ABSTRACT**  
**BETWEEN THE VISUAL AND THE VERBAL:**  
**AN AESTHETIC OF OPEN WOUNDS**  
**IN**  
**POST-TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE OF THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR (1980-1988)**

SEPTEMBER 2021

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Trauma theory of the 1990s pioneered by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman has been criticized by postcolonial scholars such as Irene Visser, Michael Balaev, and Stef Craps for being neglectful of the trauma of the colonial world in adopting a deconstructivist approach and psychologization of experiences of trauma. This antagonism between the traditional and postcolonial trauma theory has resulted in even deeper isolation of the human subject at the center of this argument. In my research, I highlight the reality and materiality of traumatic suffering in the shared realm of the human body to suggest a need for a more universal approach that places the emphasis on the significance of the suffering body in its social relations. I argue that a commixture of a pluralist/postcolonialist critique and deconstructivist psychoanalysis is exactly what is needed in non-Western theorizations and practices of representation, on the one hand, in order to address non-Western authoritarian regimes and incompetent governing systems, and, on the other, to recognize the compliance of Western and European colonial or imperial powers in perpetuating suffering.

In the first chapter, my analysis of visual representations of the Iran-Iraq war interrogates the transition from complete ideological and revolutionary thought in Iranian Sacred Defense art toward the more troubled self in photography and film. The second chapter, which focuses on the novel *Gun̄išk'hā bihišt Rā mīfahmand* [Sparrows Understand Heaven], exemplifies an era of transition, lingering between the romanticized narratives of war and its brutal reality, in those who have not experienced brutalities of war first-hand and struggle to find a balance between the concept of martyrdom and death. In *Bagh-e-Bolor* (*Crystal Garden*), examined in the third chapter, both the physical and psychological pressures of war time remain incommunicable by the characters and are thus narrated through a psychoanalytic social realist form in order to highlight the anxieties of the suffocating conditions for women and children at the home front when men die in the battle. In the fourth and last chapter, Ahmad Dehghan's *Man Ghatel-e-Pesaretan Hastam*, (*A Vital Killing*) takes the reader to a whole new level of post-traumatic madness, a state of being where the body itself doesn't remain immune from the ravages of psychic breakdown, nor does the psyche remain intact from the extremes of bodily wounds.

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## **Introduction**

Shell-shock. How many a brief bombardment had its long-delayed after-effect in the minds of these survivors, many of whom had looked at their companions and laughed while the inferno did its best to destroy them. Not then was their evil hour, but now; now, in the sweating, suffocation of nightmare, in paralysis of limbs, in the stammering of dislocated speech. Worst of all, in the disintegration of those qualities through which they had been so gallant and selfless and uncomplaining – this, in the finer types of men, was the unspeakable tragedy of shell shock.

—Siegfried Sassoon, *Sherston's Progress: The Memoirs of George Sherston*

“I want to die.” A single-sentence text message appeared in my phone, sent from a woman in her early thirties from western Iran, someone who had been contaminated by the chemical bombardment of her village when she was two years old. She was left behind in the chaos while villagers perished or fled for their lives during the Iran-Iraq war, which lasted from 1980 until 1988. The sentence stayed bare, simple, and naked in front of my eyes for a few long minutes, making me wonder how to respond. Then came a close-up selfie of her face all swollen, turned purple and blue, soaked with tears running down her eyes and cheeks as she lay helplessly, her head on a pillow. It was yet another flare up, the result of damage to her lungs from chemical exposure during the war. Gasping for air, the body’s demand for oxygen sent excruciating pain all over her body, an experience that would be repeated throughout her life, resulting in hospitalization each time. But what did those few words have to do with what was actually happening in her body and psyche? And how did they describe her pain, except by making it inescapable, wordless, and less sharable, as if death itself was the only communicable meaning, the only escape from her sense of defeat, confronted with the clutching hands of her suffering and the impossibility of having any control over the pain. Her pain and suffering became a self-referential and self-destructive force, an atemporal experience analogous to nothingness, outside of the boundaries of reality, a devouring abyss. In part, perhaps her desire



for “death” came from her inability to endure and to narrativize the experience of the extreme, to materialize it, to say *what was it like*. Yet this desire prompted her to pronounce her subjectivity, her very own existence. The “I” who had demanded “death” – the forgotten subject hanging on the verge of death – became visible, claiming agency over her isolated suffering. Had it not been for the image she shared in that moment, her suffering would have remained a secret, her demand for death an uncertain, untethered, abstract form of desolation. With her ambiguous statement, and with a sense of urgency, she tried to share her unspeakable suffering, whereas “I” the reader remained in doubt, unable to feel that same experience. Nothing happened in my body, except the vague sense of empathy and sorrow that passed through my mind and heart.

In *Sherston's Progress* (1936), quoted above, Siegfried Sassoon has written perhaps one of the most comprehensive statements about the post-traumatic consequences of war. As a soldier in World War I who was treated for shell shock, and who was also a writer and a poet, Sassoon reveals with the vision of a storyteller the long-lasting psychological effects of exposure to traumatic events, their effect on the physical body, and also the linguistic and communicative capabilities and existential views of survivors of war. Sassoon’s revelatory vision came about long before the general public became aware of the research on traumatic disorders. During and after the end of World War I, shell-shocked soldiers were treated with repetitive and brutal electric shocks in order to restore their memories and send them back to the frontlines. Hypnosis was another restorative treatment used to revitalize a soldier’s self-control. Those who showed signs of what today we would call PTSD were labeled as “morally invalid” and were court-martialed for expressing their concerns about symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Sassoon’s writings revealed the “disintegration” of the subject and the “unspeakable tragedy of shell shock” long before the trauma theories of the 1990s appeared, making claims about the nature of the

undecidability, unspeakability, incomprehensibility, and uncertainty of traumatic experience and before the development of postcolonial and pluralist trauma scholarship added to or countered dominant Western perspectives. The pluralist model was developed to challenge the unspeakable model and to emphasize the variability in traumatic representation. Regardless of these theoretical debates, however, the ordinary subject was and is, in the case of the civilian survivor, fully aware of the dismantling effects of suffering and its imposing limitations on language.

The two scenarios described above, taken from two different wars and contexts, provide a first-hand account of physical and psychological traumatic experience and its domineering and crippling effects on affected human subjects. They open a window on the content of what will follow in this dissertation. My bearing witness to the Iran-Iraq war and my postwar experience of persons who have experienced extreme trauma have influenced my theoretical approach as well as my analysis of a number of different forms of cultural production – namely literature, film, photography, and painting – which aim to represent the war experience. This dissertation, beyond its academic and intellectual component, is derived from my own unmitigated and factual experience of traumatic encounters, personal and familial, as well as my professional and humanitarian involvement with survivors of the Iran-Iraq war. Just as Sassoon’s notion of the “unspeakable” is first and foremost based on experience, rather than mere intellectual or creative curiosity, I too focus on moments of extreme traumatic experiences that remain in and on physical and psychological memory: in this specific case, the event of war and its aftereffects for those who survive the immediate threat of death but continue to live with the threat of a slow and agonizing physical and psychological death, while dealing with symptoms beyond comprehension or control as well as the intrusive reliving of a lasting pain in the present moment.

The first scenario, taken from an ordinary Iranian civilian's perspective, indirectly corresponds to a distant traumatic event, one that even the subject herself does not have a clear memory of, yet its reality, told to her by others, continues to define her present and remains in and on her body. Thus, her present is defined by a history she only vaguely knows. A victim of the Iran-Iraq war, she also represents the experience of the Other who, from a Western standpoint, has been affected by colonial and imperial domination and oppression. The second case, rooted in a colonizing history, references the perspective of a European intellectual, a survivor of an event that only belatedly is comprehended through his haunting and debilitating symptoms. Both examples reveal the "unspeakable" nature of a suffering that is beyond theory and beyond history. The experience of the extreme nature of war – its associated pain, suffering, loss, and trauma – is a moment of the collapse of meaning in existence, making it wordless, a quality that renders it meaningless. The meaninglessness of suffering cripples language, leaving it unable to communicate an extreme experience that lends itself to emptiness and even death. The survivor, or the sufferer, is caught in an interminable, ongoing, cyclical move in search of words and meaning toward resolution and communication. As Harold Schweizer states, "Even one's expression of the indignities of illness and pain may add only more to that sense of being sequestered in a realm altogether too morbidly physical, altogether too much one's own. Locked up in the obscurity of the body, the sufferer recedes into silence" (Schweizer 231). As Schweizer's analogy suggests, an experience that is beyond comprehension and language does not negate the materiality and reality of that experience; on the contrary, it becomes too real and too overwhelming to endure in one's body and psyche. It is in this moment when normalcy collapses that the inanimate internal experience and emotion of the sufferer begs for a language compatible with what feels "too much one's own."

By taking into account the materiality of traumatic experience, including the specific cultural and historical contexts in which it occurs, and by assuming a relationship between the traumatized subject and the reader/viewer/listener of the forms of cultural production in which traumatic experience has been represented, this dissertation aims to highlight the individuality of suffering while at the same time recognizing that an individual's traumatic experience does not and should not negate the historical, social, or political factors that contribute to it. It calls for different forms of representations in the visual art and literature of post-war Iran that acknowledge that the suffering brought about by war can only be properly understood, remembered, and redefined retrospectively by recognizing the bodily and psychical defeat of the individuals involved, including civilians. My exploration in this dissertation into the realm of the internal experience of survivors and their representation in art and literature asks for a new perspective and new modes of reading, listening, and representing the stories of surviving individuals of the Iran-Iraq war and beyond.

### **Literature and Trauma Theory**

According to Geoffrey Hartman, trauma theory focuses on the “relationship of words and trauma” helping us to “read the wound” with the aid of literature. In an insightful observation, he states that there is “always a disjunction between experience and understanding of it” and that “Literary theory/knowledge finds the ‘real,’ identifies with it, and attempts to bring it back [into focus]. The language of this literary construction of trauma is not literal; it is a different sort of statement that relates to that negative moment in experience that cannot be or has not been adequately experienced” (“On Traumatic Knowledge”540). This definition sheds light on that moment of the extreme, the shock of a loss, witnessing a brutal blow, extreme pain that defeats tolerance, comprehension, and therefore language. There is a reality that trauma and literary

theory have helped to identify: a moment of experience “experienced too soon and too unexpectedly,” as Cathy Caruth states, before the subject is there to receive it consciously.

First developed in the 1990s, based on Freudian notions of repression, dissociation, disruption, and repetition compulsion, the pioneers of trauma theory, including Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman, were poststructuralist scholars who adopted deconstructionist theory to analyze trauma and its representation. Their focus was on what they identified as the universal dissociative symptoms experienced by trauma sufferers. Caruth suggested that trauma was an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminated the inherent contradictions of experience and language (Balaev, *Contemporary Approaches* 1). This dissociation of consciousness is understood to be caused by the terror and surprise experienced at the time of specific events, and these emotional states are the main reason that meaningful recollection and the normal integration of the original experience become impossible for the subject. The belatedness of reflection, the recurrence of symptoms, and the reliving of the experience, along with many other symptoms, are a direct result of the absence of consciousness in the moment of the experience. This neurobiological/psychological response explains the inability for sufferers to comprehend and narrativize the experience; hence their belated recollections only indirectly and with some degree of distortion can recall the past.

Caruth’s and Hartman’s framework for understanding history is based on their examination of delayed responses and “other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 11). They suggest that the examination of the manifestations of trauma on the victim allows us to better understand the implications of trauma for the sufferer and to situate it within the history that surrounds it. Caruth sees victim/survivor testimony as a marker of the effects of trauma, serving as an act of “departure,” of walking away, of surviving and managing the effects

of the experience. Caruth suggests that at the heart of a trauma narrative is “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life; between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (*Unclaimed Experience* 7). Such characteristic doubleness is one of the underlying reasons why the language of trauma becomes literary: it reflects the difficulty of not saying *what happened* but instead *how it felt*.

While poststructuralist representations of trauma have focused on its universal dissociative symptoms, Michael Balaev takes a more nuanced and pragmatic approach, arguing that deconstructivist theories are both asocial and apolitical. He notes, for example, that Caruth views trauma as an unsolvable problem of the unconscious. Balaev takes issue with the view that for the trauma sufferer the past is a void and that any language referring to absence is indeterminate or ambiguously referential (*Contemporary Approaches* 1). He – along with other postcolonial critics, including Laurie Vickroy,<sup>1</sup> Kali Tal,<sup>2</sup> Stef Craps, Irene Visser, and clinical practitioner Judith Herman<sup>3</sup> – emphasizes the social, cultural, and political specificities of traumatic experience against the Caruthian view, which they feel depicts victims of trauma as devoid of autonomy and agency, and thus negates the possibility of understanding history through trauma narratives. In his critique of poststructuralist approaches to trauma narrative, Balaev argues that “if the larger social, political, and economic practices that influence violence

---

<sup>1</sup> In *Reading Trauma Narratives : The Contemporary Novel & the Psychology of Oppression*, Laurie Vickroy shows how writers such as Margaret Atwood, William Faulkner, and Toni Morrison try to broaden our understanding of the relationship between individual traumas and the social forces of injustice, subjugation, and objectification. The texts studied in her *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* reveal the complexities of power and the relationship between society’s pressures and challenges and the individual’s psychological well-being.

<sup>2</sup> Kali Tal’s *Worlds of Hurt* explores the relationships between individual trauma and cultural interpretation, mainly focusing on the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, and the sexualized violence against women.

<sup>3</sup> Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman, places individual experience in a broader political frame and argues that psychological trauma is inextricable from its social and political context. She draws on her own research on and treatment of incest, as well as a substantial literature on combat veterans and victims of political terror.

are the background contexts or threads in the fabric of a traumatic experience in the first place, then trauma's meaning is locatable rather than permanently lost" (*Contemporary Approaches* 8).

Herman and Vickroy similarly propose that trauma is socially induced, and that there are empirical foundations for trauma, including the ongoing connection to a global political movement for human rights that helps promote the ability to speak about the unspeakable.

In her 2015 article "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects," Irene Visser retraces the new wave in trauma studies, calling for a decolonized trauma theory in response to the publication of a special issue of *Studies in the Novel* in Spring/Summer 2008 (250). This special issue, edited by Gert Buelens and Stef Craps, focuses on the decolonization of trauma theory and the need for accounts of trauma that include non-Western and non-European experiences, including racism and the ongoing everyday suffering of marginal groups. In her abstract, Visser states that "openness to non-Western belief systems and their rituals and ceremonies in the engagement with trauma is needed in order to achieve the remaining major objectives of the long-standing project of decolonizing trauma theory" (250). Quoting Craps, she notes that Craps, in his critique of what he terms "Caruthian theory", argues that if trauma studies is to "have any hope of redeeming its promise of ethical effectiveness, the social and historic relations must be taken into account, and that traumatic histories of subordinate groups should be situated against the histories of socially dominant groups" (Visser 253). Quoting Luckhurst, Visser writes that in Caruth's Freudian outlook, the emphasis is on the affirmation of the crippling effects of trauma; memory is situated "entirely under the sign of post-traumatic melancholia", and "there is a kind of injunction to maintain the post-traumatic condition" (254).

Visser also notes that some of the steps needed to be taken in order to release the ahistorical hold of Freudian/Caruthian trauma theory are contained in Dominick LaCapra's work,

which is “directed at the notion that melancholia and fragility are defining and unalterable characteristics of the post-traumatic stage, and lead to the lasting effect of weakened communal and individual identities” (254). She concludes that “In postcolonial studies today, trauma is recognized as a very complex phenomenon. It is not only understood as acute, individual, and event-based, but also as collective and chronic; trauma can weaken individuals and communities, but it can also lead to a stronger sense of identity and a renewed social cohesion” (Visser 263).

In his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra argued that, when one is addressing a specific traumatic event, it is preferable to use a type of writing that does not only embody “acting out” but also “working through”; with this method, a writer may develop “articulations that are recognized as problematic but still function as limits and as possibly desirable resistances to undecidability” (22). This interactional approach, he suggests, can allow trauma victims to regain a sense of mastery and control over their life, to reduce the intensity of overwhelming helplessness, and ultimately to thrive. LaCapra also considers the “empathic unsettlement” that trauma narratives can give voice to where these articulations are left unresolved; as such, the narratives mirror the fact that for both the trauma victim and the reader the understanding of a traumatic experience is never complete (78-79). Just as the psychological state of the narrative subject is left unsettled, so too are the feelings of the reader regarding the correct (in the sense of ethical) response to a character’s suffering.

Many theorists, like Judith Herman, believe that psychoanalytic notions of trauma, especially that of Freud and his followers, gradually shifted away from reality and “psychoanalysis became a study of the internal vicissitudes of fantasy and desire, dissociated from the reality of experience” (14). Geoffrey Hartman, however, provides an astute psychoanalytic elaboration of the “real,” one that is particularly useful in this debate and in my



own approach to the literary and artistic representations of trauma and post-traumatic suffering discussed in this dissertation. Hartman uses Lacan's concept of the real to explain that Freud did not totally abandon empirical reality, but rather pointed to the existence of a different kind of reality: "The real is not the real, in the sense of a specific, identifiable thing or cause; however specific it may be, it is also a burning idea, or its own 'wake' of desire" and as it pertains to my own argument, "the real can be found in the world of death-feelings, lost objects, and drives" (537). The usefulness of this particular approach is to point out that the specific moment of "unmediated shock" – and the subsequent inner chaos, excess of emotions, repetition of imagery and memory, or painful desire for the lost loved one – are no less real than any external, identifiable causes. In these instances, the real is simply that thing that cannot be elaborated by language, even though its historical cause can be traced, and it can be diagnosed based on its physical symptoms, as, in my example above, the strong desire for death by the female victim of the Iran-Iraq war, in the wake of her excruciating pain. This understanding of the real, Hartman believes, leads us toward literary theory, "because the disjunction between experiencing (phenomenal or empirical) and understanding (thoughtful naming, in which words replace things, or their images), is what figurative language expresses and explores" (540). Despite LaCapra's criticism of their poststructuralist approach, he shares something in common with Caruth and Hartman in highlighting the unsettling and unresolvable effect of trauma on the victim, a view that makes their arguments worthy of attention, especially in the context of colonialism's wounding and the suffering of non-white populations.

I argue that this commixture of a pluralist/postcolonialist critique and deconstructivist psychoanalysis is exactly what is needed in non-Western theorizations and practices of representation, on the one hand, in order to address non-Western authoritarian regimes and

incompetent governing systems, and, on the other, to recognize the compliance of Western and European colonial or imperial powers in perpetuating suffering. There is a need to draw attention to the unspeakability, individuality and invisibility of the psychoanalytic “real” as the basis for human suffering and to acknowledge the individual as the point of departure for the collective and socio-political. In this sense, Caruth’s notion of the state of in-betweenness, between “knowing and not knowing”, the oscillation between life and death, becomes especially useful in understanding the state of suffering regardless of the skin color or nationality of the victim. Although the postcolonial interrogation of Western psychologization of trauma may rightly reject the emphasis on melancholia, inaction, and submissiveness as the inevitable outcome of traumatization, it nevertheless fails to reflect sufficiently on certain components of trauma: the significance of the particularity of individual suffering; the problematic politics of viewing all trauma as part of a collective experience; the fetishizing of trauma to support teleological tales of national resistance; and the view of all the West as White colonizers. Decolonization requires more than opposition to established theories and the use of the same binary distinctions of colonial and imperial powers (e.g. us/them, victim/perpetrator, individual/collective, good/evil). Criticism can be directed at postcolonial trauma theory for overemphasizing the collectivity of traumatic experience to the extent that individuals lose their particular story, while their suffering is subsumed in ideological notions of self-determination, independence, or nationalism.

Michael Rothberg has perhaps taken the best middle-ground position in response to this predicament. In his response to the special issue, *Studies in the Novel*, Rothberg suggested a more comprehensive approach to trauma through a comparative look at different traumatic histories and their literary representations. Rothberg proposed rethinking trauma as “collective, spatial, and material (instead of individual, temporal, and linguistic)” in order to break “the hold

of the category of trauma as it had been developed by Caruth, Felman, Laub, and others” (“Decolonizing Trauma Studies” 228), a statement that many postcolonial trauma scholars quote in isolation, in order to emphasize the urgency of decolonizing trauma theory. However, Rothberg goes on, at great length, in his attempt to pose the problem in a different way than most of these scholars. He suggests that

Instead of focusing criticism on the supposed "whiteness" of trauma studies' subjects, we might want to say that as long as trauma studies foregoes comparative study and remains tied to a narrow Eurocentric framework, it distorts the histories it addresses (such as the Holocaust) and threatens to reproduce the very Eurocentrism that lies behind those histories. [...]The question of whiteness leads to a second, equally important point. In addition to imposing an anachronistic racial categorization, the attribution "white Westerners" also risks reproducing a notion of a homogenous "West" that stays within the terms of the dominant framework. What is the "West" and why would we want to evoke this highly ideological and Eurocentric concept? I mean this question quite seriously. Not only is the referent of the "West" highly elusive, but use of the concept ends up confirming the racialized framework it seeks to mark and displace. (Rothberg, “Decolonizing Trauma Studies” 227-8)

Using the example of Andre Schwarz-Bart's novel *A Woman Named Solitude* (*La mulatresse Solitude* 1972), a tale about trans-Atlantic slavery, Rothberg calls for “anachronism” and “anatopism” (spatial misplacement) in order to depict multiple traumatic legacies. In this novel, like the splintered bones of the African slaves, Schwarz-Bart splinters time and space with a tale of slavery that correlates to Caribbean history and lands on the ruins of Warsaw ghettos. He argues that by employing “anachronism and anatopism (dis)placements we can bring together the Holocaust, slavery, and colonialism as singular yet relational histories” in what he calls “multidirectional memory” (Rothberg, “Decolonizing Trauma Studies” 225).

Rothberg’s suggestion sounds like a more subtle, comprehensible version of Caruthian psychoanalytic language. Like him, she emphasized the cultural and historical interconnectedness of traumas, but also the need to listen to all stories of trauma in order to move on from both the individual and historical isolation imposed by traumatic experience:

The meaning of the trauma's address beyond itself concerns, indeed, not only individual isolation but a wider historical isolation that, in our time, is communicated on the level of our cultures. [...] A speaking and a listening from the site of trauma does not rely, I would suggest, on what we simply know of each other, but on what we don't yet know of our own traumatic pasts. In a catastrophic age, that is, trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures: not as a simple understanding of the pasts of others but rather, within the traumas of contemporary history, as our ability to listen through the departures we have all taken from ourselves. (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 11)

In her introduction to *Trauma: Explorations of Memory*, Caruth explains why and how trauma is not only a form of absence or "departure" but also a call to survival through new forms of contact with others:

The final import of the psychoanalytic and historical analysis of trauma is to suggest that the inherent departure, within trauma, from the moment of its first occurrence, is also a means of passing out of the isolation imposed by the event: that the history of a trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another. (10–11)

Thus, despite the antagonism between postcolonial and poststructuralist trauma theories, both emphasize the importance of literature and literary studies as a mode of understanding and responding to the traumatic experience and narrative and as a potential for healing and continuity. The most crucial point that Rothberg is justifiably keen to point out is "the contemporary misrecognition of the victims of trauma" and the fact that "empathy and recognition are unevenly apportioned in contemporary discourses on trauma" ("Decolonizing Trauma Studies" 227). Without generalizing the specificities of traumatic histories, Rothberg believes the binaries of "the West-and-the-Rest distinction" can never be free of the "aura of racism". He argues for a decolonized trauma studies that aims to demonstrate the hybridity and heterogeneity of Euro-American societies without ignoring hierarchies of power in order to indict imperial politics and legacies. Within this framework, he also addresses the misrecognition or unrecognition of victims of trauma and political violence in literature which has played an important role in bringing the experiences of non-European-American traumatic histories into the spotlight. He suggests that only a comparative approach to the effects of trauma on the

individual, the collective, the arts, and culture from the perspective of scholars who know the language and politics of their subjects can put familiar cultural binaries to the test. More evenly apportioned empathy and recognition will call attention to the unrepresented and underrepresented people and histories whose trauma experiences have yet to become visible in public discourse. In order for dialogue to take place in a shared space with the more dominant populations, non-European-American traumatic histories must be brought under the spotlight. And in an age of ongoing genocide and neo-imperial wars, literature may be one of the most effective empathic means for responding to political violence and recognizing all victims of traumatic experiences. The question of which literary genre is most effective for the representation of traumatic experience is another matter.

### **Forms of Representations**

While deconstructivists and postcolonialists were debating trauma theory, historians and literary theorists were considering which literary or historical genres could best represent traumatic experience. In a chapter from *The Persistence of History* titled “The Modernist Event” (1996), the historian Hayden White suggested that current criticism directed toward modernist art and literature, for example, maintains that it dissolves the “trinity of event, character, and plot,” the holding tenets of nineteenth-century realist literature and the historiography from which this literature derived (White 17). Citing the Holocaust as an example, White argued that “anti-narrative non-stories produced by literary modernism offer the only prospect for adequate representation of the kind of “unnatural” events... that mark our era”. He suggests that “psychopathologies” of modernist writing and film with their “artificial closures, the blockage of narrative... deformation and formal compensations, the dissolution or splitting of narrative functions” may offer the possibility of narrating such traumatic histories (White 32).

The problem that can arise from such anti-realist proposals concerning the representation of traumatic experience, specifically within Holocaust scholarship, is that events of a catastrophic nature are implicitly seen as transcending history, visualization, narrativization, explanation, which then moves toward a theologization of the event. Significant figures such as Elie Wiesel, Claude Lanzmann, and Jean-Francois Lyotard are proponents of this discourse of “transcendence,” and the irresolvability of the “extreme” into the everyday, halting established modes of representation and understanding. The realist tendency, on the other hand, exemplified by Hannah Arendt’s concept of the “banality of evil,” proposes that extremity does not break “with the ordinary dimensions of the modern world but exists on a continuum with it” (Rothberg, *TR* 4-5). In Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s thought on the growth of fascism that led to the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust, antisemitism is associated with a specific moment within capitalist development and fascism is an embryonic property of bourgeois society in its imperialist chapter; for them anti-semitism is directly linked with the development of capitalism.<sup>4</sup> From this second perspective, empirical, scientific, historical, and sociological methods of analysis are sufficient to demonstrate that extreme experiences can be comprehended and represented within already established methods of representation. (*TR* 4) This dispute parallels the antagonism between deconstructivists and postcolonialists regarding whether trauma is speakable or not. One could say that the realist project is more compatible with the socio-political ideals of the pluralists and postcolonialists while the modernists align more easily with the deconstructivist approach to trauma.

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<sup>4</sup> See Adorno, Theodore. *Negative Dialectics*. Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004. See also Seymour, David. “Adorno and Horkheimer: Enlightenment and Antisemitism.” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. 51, no. 2, Aut 2000, pp. 297–312.

In his book *The Concept of Modernism*, Astradur Eysteinnsson stated that typically realism has brought literature in close contact with the common communicative and practical function of language. Modernism, on the other hand, is defined by its resistance to “reality fabrications that are recuperable as stories or as situations that can readily be reformulated in sociopragmatic terms” (Eysteinnsson 187). This does not mean that modernism rejects reality, but that it seeks reality as it is processed by human consciousness, fragmented and interrupted. With respect to realism, scholars from Erich Auerbach to Michael Rothberg have pointed to a significant characteristic that may change the traditional definition of both realism and modernism, making it more compatible with the twenty-first century. In order to suggest a connection between modernist and realist projects, Auerbach characterized modern realism as the “elevation of more extensive and socially inferior human groups to the position of subject matter for problematic-existential representation, [...] and the embedding of random persons and events in the general course of contemporary history” (491). Rothberg, speaking directly to the topic of trauma, suggests that trauma seeks a way out of the realist and antirealist contradiction by performing the presence of extremity in the everyday. He suggests that it is in the “non-reductive articulation of the extreme and the everyday that the reworking of realism under the sign of trauma becomes possible” (*TR* 118).

In this dissertation I intend to occupy a middle-ground position with respect to trauma’s representation in contemporary art and literature. In exploring the aftermath and consequences of the Iran-Iraq war for individual survivors, I intend to open a space in which a dialogue between the postcolonial and the more dominant European and Western cultures can take place. I believe that the “West and the Rest” dichotomy further isolates underrepresented groups and deepens already deep divisions. For this reason, I argue that the material body – and the psyche within

and belonging to that body, which is itself not an alien entity – is the first and last receiver of all traumatic blows and that, prior to its identification with geography, culture, and politics, it is the naked recipient of physical and psychological pain. This means that the sociopolitical specificities cloak this naked body only after it has received the shock of suffering, giving it a more defined quality. In this approach, all human beings are isolated in their initial pain, cast away and unable to share fully the pain they experience. At the same time, when an outsider to that experience starts to read or listen to the screams of suffering, a relational and associative tie will inevitably be established with the particular context of that trauma. For both the subject and the witness it is necessary to give meaning to the extreme raw experience and to communicate it in order to overcome the difficulty of its meaninglessness. It is always possible that deconstructing the pain and suffering to its core naked reality (first on the individual level, and second, by reading it within the sociopolitical context) may lead to exposing further injustices that are forced on the human body by an internal or a colonial and imperial authority. Whether one overcomes the extreme experience with resilience toward regeneration and an optimistic future or not, however, is secondary to the question of justice and the singularity of the traumatic experience. It is to this question of justice that this dissertation turns, following Shoshana Felman's observation that literature and art in a broad sense have a critical and vital role to play in voicing historical traumas and trials, insofar as literature, and especially trauma literature, is committed to the notion of justice (8). In this social justice approach, deconstructivist trauma theory does not turn a blind eye to the politics of victimization, but rather emphasizes the irreducibility of represented traumatic suffering to one definable meaning.



### **Iranian Anti-Imperialist Revolution, and Sacred War**

Throughout and immediately after World War I (1914-18), British and Russian troops occupied huge parts of once independent Persia. Despite declaring neutrality in the European war, for its geographic location, being a bridge between Europe and the Indian subcontinent, Iran became the crossroad of the neighboring empires of the Russians, the Ottomans, and the British and with its enormous banks of oil was one of the major locations of the confrontations between the Great Powers during the First World War. The empires directly took interest, meddled, and intervened in Iran. After World War I, and the decline and disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, the victorious Allies sliced up the Middle East; in 1920 Mesopotamia (Iraq), sharing borders with Iran in the West, became a British mandated territory. Palestine was placed under British control by the League of Nations. The Arabs of Palestine, who helped allies against Ottomans during World War I in exchange for their pledged support for independence, were betrayed; their state became mandatory, and was later officially dissolved under Israeli occupation. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948, made possible by the support of Britain and United States, gave the imperialists a newly established ground in the region to practice their power. However, Iran's position in the middle of Western and European war games did not end by the end of World War I.<sup>5</sup>

During World War II, the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Persia in August 1941 placed Iran as the wrestling ring for Imperial powers again.<sup>6</sup> The invasion's purpose was to ensure the security

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<sup>5</sup> For more on Iran's wartime history that shaped its internal history in present see Farrokh, Kaveh. *Iran at War, 1500-1988*. Osprey Publishing, 2011.

<sup>6</sup>See Stewart, Richard A. *Sunrise at Abadan: The British and Soviet Invasion of Iran, 1941*. Praeger, 1988.

of Allied supply lines to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), safeguard Iranian oil fields, and limit German influence in Iran, the Iranians had cultivated ties with Germany and were trading with the country for decades. Germany's appeal to Iran was partly because it had no history of imperialism in the region, unlike the British and the Russians<sup>7</sup>. However, despite claiming neutrality at an early stage of World War II, Iran assumed greater tactical importance to the British government; they feared that the UK-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company might fall into German hands. The two Allied nations put pressure on Iran and on the Shah, which led to heightened hostilities and to anti-British demonstrations in Tehran.<sup>8</sup> The Iranian nationalists who had becoming increasingly frustrated by the foreign interference and exploitation of the country's oil industry and other resources, led by future prime minister of Iran, Mohammad Mossadegh, eventually passed legislation in 1951, starting a movement for nationalization of Anglo-Persian Oil Company. However, this dream of independence was soon crushed by the imperial powers.

In 1953, under orders from President Eisenhower, the CIA and MI6 organized a military coup that overthrew Iran's first democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh. Following the coup, the U.S appointed Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was compliant with Britain and the U.S, and the flourishing democracy under Mossadegh was soon crushed. The Shah led twenty-five years of autocratic rule that resulted in the killing of thousands of Iranians who opposed the U.S. puppet government and voiced their anger in marginalizing and dispossessing the poor.<sup>9</sup> The Islamic Revolution of 1979 led by Ayatollah

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<sup>7</sup> See Encyclopædia Iranica "Anglo-Iranian Relations iii. Pahlavi period"

<sup>8</sup> For more on the history of Iran's tensions with the Allied forces, and the internal famine and poverty that was ensured by the exploitation of Iran's agriculture, see Pollack, Kenneth. *The Persian Puzzle: Deciphering the Twenty-Five Year Conflict*. Random House, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See "Making History Relevant" in <https://makinghistoryrelevant.wordpress.com/2013/06/29/history-of-middle-east/>

Khomeini, was, and continues to be, mainly, a reactionary revolution in response to long years of exploitation of Iran and its national resources under the colonial and imperial adventurism within Iranian territories and their similarly threatening activities in the region. Khomeini preached the threat of conspiracies by foreigners and their Iranian agents during the course of his political career. His belief could, in fact, have justifiably been explained by the domination of Iran's politics by these foreigners for the past two hundred years until the Islamic Revolution. External agents were involved in all of Iran's three military coups that crushed the movements toward democracy: the ending of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in 1908 by the Anglo-Russian convention of 1907,<sup>10</sup> the Persian coup d'état of 1921 led by the British, establishing the Pahlavi dynasty, and the 1953 coup led by UK and US.<sup>11</sup> Khomeini's revolutionary movement championed the cause of the dispossessed and oppressed and used Shia ideology and religious symbolism "in elevating the revolution to a moral and spiritual battle against an infidel" (Egan 57) He held the West responsible for Iran's internal problems and endorsed Dr. Ali Shariati (1933-1977), who was a leading anti-colonial theorist in Iran, and his discourses on the importance of revolutionary Shiism, proclaiming Islam on the side of the *mustazafin*, the dispossessed, and against exploiters and imperialists.<sup>12</sup>

As an "ideologue of the Iranian revolution," Ali Shariati, a Sorbonne-educated leftist sociologist, who became a renowned scholar of struggle in the modern Middle East, introduced the theory of struggle between oppressors and the oppressed. Heavily influenced by Frantz

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<sup>10</sup> This Convention was used by Britain to check Germany's growing power in the region. Iran was partitioned into three parts, with the north being given to Russia, the southwest to Britain and the rest to remain a neutral buffer zone. This significantly hampered the efforts of the constitutionalists as Iran's autonomy was counteracted entirely and was the main reason that nationalist rhetoric was crushed.

<sup>11</sup> See Abrahamian, Ervand. *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. University of California Press, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> See Abrahamian, Ervand. *Iran between Two Revolutions*. Princeton University Press, 1982.

Fanon (1925-1961),<sup>13</sup> the West Indian psychoanalyst and social philosopher from the French colony of Martinique, Shariati justified Shiite jihad against the “Great Satan,” an epithet referring to United States in Iran since the revolution.<sup>14</sup> Islam and Shiite identity in the colonial and imperial context became an effective tool of resistance that gave a distinct identity to revolutionaries and to the populace, a national pride, and a sense of unity in order to overcome the U.S. and Britain’s puppet, the Pahlavi dynasty, and was fervently carried on after Shariati’s death in the battle with Saddam Hossein’s Baath party and his imposed war on Iranian territories.<sup>15</sup>

Shiism places a significant value on Hossein, the grandson of the Prophet, and on his martyrdom in battle against an Umayyad caliph who was viewed as an unjust, corrupt, and unpious man of power. Shariati wrote and lectured on the importance of Islam and Shiism becoming an ideology and not just a religion. Ideology for him was to give history a systematic meaning with a systematic worldview and Islam offered both a methodical framework within which to examine history and constructive prescriptions for urgent and critical political changes, because “all of the views on economics, sociology, religion, philosophy, and even on art and literature ... have a cause and effect relationship to each other.”<sup>16</sup> Shariati revived Shiism with a specific emphasis on the concept of martyrdom among the populace at a time when people were

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<sup>13</sup> Shariati translated many of Fanon’s writings into Persian in the 1960s. As a theorist of anti-colonial struggle during the Algerian War, Fanon’s analysis of the effect of colonialism on racial consciousness, integrating psychoanalysis, phenomenology, existentialism, and Negritude theory and articulated an expansive view of the psychosocial repercussions of colonialism on colonized people.

<sup>14</sup> See Lydia Apolinar’s “Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution” <https://cosmonaut.blog/2019/11/29/ali-shariati-ideologue-of-the-iranian-revolution>.

<sup>15</sup> See T.S. Allen’s “David Galula, Frantz Fanon, and the Imperfect Lessons of the Algerian War.” [https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/david-galula-frantz-fanon-and-the-imperfect-lessons-of-the-algerian-war#\\_ednref39](https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/david-galula-frantz-fanon-and-the-imperfect-lessons-of-the-algerian-war#_ednref39) Small Wars Journal published by Small Wars Foundation.

<sup>16</sup> See Shariati, Ali. “Islamology.” <http://www.shariati.com/english/islam/islam1.html>. See also Lydia Apolinar’s “Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution.”

fed up by the social injustice and class antagonism that was fueled by imperial presence in every aspect of Iranian life.

A concept of immense significance to Shariati was shahadat, or martyrdom, in the school of thought of which Hossein is the manifestation par excellence. This concept was an essential ideal to both Islamic and socialist Iranian guerrilla groups in the unfolding events leading to the revolution of 1979. Shariati was not directly involved in any of the guerrilla movements—he called himself “emotionally and spiritually weak” for that reason—but provided most of the theory and passionately praised martyrdom in a collection of lectures:

The story of martyrdom and that which martyrdom challenges is so sensitive, so belovedly exciting that it pulls the spirit towards the fire. It paralyzes logic. It weakens speech. It even makes thinking difficult. Martyrdom is a mixture of a refined love and a deep, complex wisdom. One cannot express these two at the same time and so, as a result, one cannot do them justice. In order to understand the meaning of martyrdom, the ideological school from which it takes its meaning, its expression and its value should be clarified. In European countries, the word martyr stems from ‘mortal’ which means ‘death’ or ‘to die.’ One of the basic principles in Islam (and in particular in Shi’ite culture), however, is ‘sacrifice and bear witness.’<sup>17</sup> So instead of martyrdom, i.e. death, it essentially means ‘life’, ‘evidence’, ‘testify’, ‘certify.’ These words, martyrdom and bearing witness, show the differences which exist between the vision of Shi’ite Islamic culture and the other cultures of the world.<sup>18</sup>

Shariati’s ideas and theories, in Islamic Shiite ideology and martyrdom, were fundamental for the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the concept of martyrdom, in particular, became the main motif and a powerful driving force for war efforts and even in the post-war era to give meaning to the suffering the nation endured; a concept that became the dividing line between the West and the East. As evident in Shariati’s words, the “sensitivity” of martyrdom and its paralyzing effect on logic and thinking, even though he was defining it in mystical terms,

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<sup>17</sup> Shariati is wrong on the terminology of the word. The word, “martyr,” means “witness” in Greek, and it emerged from the struggles of the early Christians with imperial Rome.

<sup>18</sup> To read the complete text see Shariati’s “Martyrdom: Arise and Bear Witness” <http://shariati.com/pdf/arise.pdf>.

became an exuberant goal to achieve for those who later joined the war. From this point of view, martyrdom was not an accident, a heartbreaking death of a hero, but a degree, a rank. It was not a means, but a goal in itself, a fate so sacred that eventually no one had dare to question or oppose it.

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Iraqi army entered the Iranian border and invaded the town of Khoramshahr on September 22, 1980 (1359 AH) imposing a deadly war, known to the world as the First Persian Gulf War, and supported by most Western and European powers who, in continuum with imperial history, did not approve of an independent Muslim country with great deposits of oil. The conflict became comparable to World War I in terms of the tactics, including an massive use of chemical weapons such as mustard gas by the Iraqi government against Iranian troops, civilians, and Iraqi Kurds. Despite the U.N. Security Council's statements that confirmed the use of chemical weapons by Iraq, however, the international community remained silent as Iraq used weapons of mass destruction against Iranian as well as Iraqi Kurds.<sup>19</sup> The war ended eight years later and left more than half a million dead and casualties. Within Iran the war was named and is known as the Imposed War ( جنگ تحمیلی Jang-e Tahmili) and the Holy Defense ( دفاع مقدس Defā'-e Moghaddas). The consequences of this conflict extend and continue far beyond the end of the conflict to the present day. In such circumstances, a revolution, followed by a bloody war, death had better mean an eternal life in order to make miserable times more tolerable. Martyrs became “testimonies” to the vile and evil of the satanic forces of the imperial world who continued to

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<sup>19</sup> The most extensive use of Chemical Weapon in the 20th century after World War I was in the Iran-Iraq conflict which was made possible as a result of extensive technical assistance from the European and US private sector. Enormous support for Iraqi chemical and biological weapons programs was provided by the administrations of George H. W. Bush and Ronald Reagan. For more see, Haines, D. D., and S. C. Fox. “Acute and Long-Term Impact of Chemical Weapons: Lessons from the Iran-Iraq War.” *Forensic Science Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, July 2014, pp. 97–114.

shed blood of a nation that now stood as equal to Hossein's uprising against tyranny and corruption and his martyrdom in Karbala.

In the cultural scene, once the revolution succeeded, after eliminating all internal political oppositions,<sup>20</sup> the newly established regime turned to cultural matters, sifting and filtering all literature and art and setting new guidelines to now eliminate cultural oppositions that contradicted the ideology of the Islamic Republic. In fact, like the country itself, all cultural productions were being remodeled to fit and reveal the changed ideological constraints and desires of the new regime now led by Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>21</sup> In the field of media and cinema, in 1982 the cabinet prohibited the exhibition of any segment of a film or the entire film that denies, manipulates, or damages the "Monotheism and submission to God and to his authority and laws" and the "role of divine revelation and its fundamental function in expressing laws."<sup>22</sup> That systematic Islamic ideology which Shariati and Khomeini desired had now swept through all aspects of culture. During and after the war that immediately followed the revolution, a new distinctive genre was born in poetry, prose, theater, visual arts, and cinema that responded to this historical event. The literature emerging from the war that left half a million dead and another half a million physically and mentally wounded men, children, and women, became known as Sacred Defense Literature, cinema corresponding to that Cinema for Sacred Defense, and the arts representing it, Art of Sacred Defense, all forged out of the political devotion and fever of that

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<sup>20</sup> Although the 1979 revolution was rendered by varied groups of Marxists, Islamists, and Islamic socialists—students, workers, and small bourgeoisie—Khomeini and his assembly of clerical conservatives, whom Shariati criticized and preached against, took control in the years that followed, uniting power completely by 1981.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the Islamization of culture, see Egan, Eric. *The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran*. Mage Publishers, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> See Naficy, Hamid. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 3, The Islamicate Period: 1978- 1984*. Durham, Duke UP, 2012. The article continues as: "Resurrection and its role in the evolution of humans toward God. Justness of God in creation and in law. The importance of Imamate [religious leadership by the imams] and its fundamental function in maintaining the Islamic revolution. The role of Islamic Republic of Iran under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini in ridding the Muslims and the downtrodden of the clutches of world imperialism" (Nafisy, 191)

struggle to convince the populace about the righteousness of the war and to disseminate the ideology of the Islamic Republic. Some writers and critics refuse to label literature from the Iran-Iraq war as War Literature. Sacred Defense Literature, according to literary critics in Iran, is called a Literature of Resistance which has different characteristics than war literature.<sup>23</sup> Thematically, much of the Sacred Defense cultural and artistic production had similar tendencies, portraying the virtue of the Islamic Republic, but was “mechanical in flow and metallic in flavor...too propagandistic—i.e. chanting, revolutionary slogans, etc.—to contain any engaging intellectual reflection on the meaning of the revolution” (Karimi-Hakkak 155)<sup>24</sup>

Symbols of the Shia themes of sacrifice and martyrdom, which Shariati promoted and theorized, dominated the cultural scene and became superficial and simplistic in the division between good and evil, oppressed and oppressor. (Egan 21) Commemoration of the dead and the fallen in the Islamic Republic became an institutional industry on the part of the state, which promoted a religious, mystic, and sacrificial interpretation of death in war, pushing a political agenda to create a homogenous cultural identity and to show the world the new face of the nation. “We must continue to export our revolution, but in cultural terms,” stated the Foreign Minister, “the Western countries are doing the same thing. They export their culture, their way of thinking, through the mass media or universities where foreign students are taught” (qtd. in Egan 126). Paranoid about the infiltration of the foreigners, any secular, historical, intellectual, or scientific study of revolution and war that questioned the ideology or righteousness of these two historic events was viewed as an attempt to weaken and delegitimize the now independent republic and, therefore, a benefactor to imperial plots.

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<sup>23</sup> See Hosseini, Hassan, *Gozide-e Shere Jang va Defa-e Moghaddas* [Selected Poems of War and Sacred Defense] Sooreh Mehr. 1999.

<sup>24</sup> See Karimi-Hakkak, Ahmad. “Of Hail and Hounds: The Image of the Iranian Revolution in Recent Persian Literature.” *State, Culture, and Society*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1985, pp. 148–180.



The current Congress of Poetry of Sacred Defense is sponsored by the Organization for Preservation and Propagation of Sacred Literature and Values, and both organizations have one specific objective: “they must specifically deliver the message of martyrs to the fabric of the society and on a more general basis must preserve the core ideas that inspire revolutionary poetry” (Farzad 359). The terminology of the poets and the poetry committed to the ideals of sacred defense is full of religious imagery and Shiite allusions to "martyrdom" and "the martyr," where leaving for the war front dismantles both the temporality and the topographical characteristics of the two different historical events. In the unity of the events of Karbala and the Iran-Iraq war the path of departure toward war dissolves into the path to the battle of Karbala in the seventh century, and both movements become unified in connotation and function.<sup>25</sup>

Visual arts and paintings of Islamic Revolution and Sacred Defense especially in the first two decades after the revolution and war very much resemble the poetry of this genre and adopt a symbolic language in representing, not the dead material body, but the religious, ideological, and moral meaning of death in an unjust battle between good and evil. In paintings of this era religious thought as a result of Islamic Revolution and nationalism as a result of war intertwine and manifest a mythological and spiritual art. Dying in battle for the sake of protecting the integrity of a righteousness of people against the infiltration of evil and safeguarding a newly formed Islamic revolution becomes a selfless act of heroism.<sup>26</sup> In this genre, martyrs of Karbala

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<sup>25</sup> Examples of this religious and devotional terminology can be found in poems by the iconic war poets like Sayyed Hasan Hosyani, Salman Harati, Gheysar Aminpoor, Mohammadreza Abdolmalekian, and Alireza Ghazveh. These lines are from Sayeed Hassan Hosseini, “I am leaving mother, Karbela is calling me From the land of the companion, the familiar Friend is calling me There is no time for how and why, farewell mother, That essence of my soul, without how and why is calling me Woe unto me if I don't give my whole, on the path of love Since the Friend with a strong, clear voice is calling me” (Farzad 358). See also, *Gozide-e Shere Jang va Defa-e Moghaddas* [Selected Poems of War and Sacred Defense] Sooreh Mehr. 1999.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the paintings of revolution and war see Goodarzi, Dibaj Morteza. *Honar-e Moteahed Ejtemai va Dini dar Iran. (Committed Social and Religious Art in Iran: Paintings of Revolution.)* Tehran, Farhangestan e Honar Publication, 2009.

transcend history and become witnesses at the death-bed of Iranian soldiers on canvas. Red tulips represent the fallen soldiers, white doves bring a message of salvation, and a shining light from above leads to the world of eternal happiness. Religious symbols like the Qur'an, revolutionary symbols such as Chafieh and green and red headbands, war symbols such as tanks and swords, animal symbols such as horses give visual cues to the desired revolutionary and religious message of the artist. Artists of Sacred Defense seek to visualize a transcendental beauty to promote the goals of revolution.<sup>27</sup>

Alongside poetry and visual arts of Sacred Defense, derived from the Islamic philosophical school of Eshragh, *Illumination*,<sup>28</sup> films and documentaries of war portrayed a mystical element embroiled in the experience of war and the concept of martyrdom. Morteza Avini's specific theory and style of documentary in *Revayate Fath* (Narration of Victory)– which he named Sabke Eshraqi (Illumination Style)–was influenced by his readings of Islamic philosophy and mysticism. In his prose, Avini appropriated many components of Shi'ite rhetoric and symbolism such as those of the Karbala archetype and had repeated intertextual references to Islamic texts (Esfandiary 146). Cinema for Sacred Defense, influenced by Avini's mystic style, in its early stages, similarly portrayed and promoted this mystical evolution of a common man in the battlefield.<sup>29</sup> In his early films, Ebrahim Hatamikia, who is widely recognized as a founding

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<sup>27</sup> See paintings by Kazem Chalipa, Mostafa Goodarzi, Iraj Eskandari, Gholamali Taheri, Hossein Khosrojerdi, and Naser Palangi.

<sup>28</sup> Trained in Avicennan Peripateticism, Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (1154–1191) has become the eponym of an 'Illuminationist' (*Eshraqi*) philosophical tradition.

<sup>29</sup> Ebrahim Hatami-kia, Rasool Mollaqli-poor, Kamal Tabrizi, Mojtaba Ra'ei, Ahmadreza Darvish, Jamal Shoorje and Azizollah Hamid-nejad are some of the film-makers who began their cinematic career by making films about the Iran– Iraq war and had sympathetic approach to the concept of self-sacrifice in war. See Esfandiary Shahab, *Iranian Cinema and Globalization: National, Transnational, and Islamic Dimensions*, edited by Brian Shoemsmith, Intellect Books Ltd, 2012.

figure of the Iranian Sacred Defense cinema, depicted the war front as the school of Erfan (Islamic mysticism): a spiritual quest for truth and self-realization.<sup>30</sup>

The General Policies and Principles of the Voice and Vision Organization of the Islamic Republic of Iran has laid down the duties and obligation of the mass media to uphold and promote the principles of Islam and the policy of “Neither East nor West”<sup>31</sup> (Egan 126). Consequently, the political and the cultural became meticulously linked to build a bulwark against the materialist capitalism or socialism. The United States represented the West, or capitalism, while the Soviet Union represented the East, or socialism, both materialist ideologies that help maintain imperialist domination of the Third World. It would be sacrilegious, from the third-generation fundamentalist poets’ point of view, “to look at the Poetry of Sacred Defense through a secular perspective. This would be nothing short of dishonoring 'our beloved martyrs, who knowingly and with love for religion and respect for the great martyrs of Karbala stepped onto the frontline and drank from the cup of martyrdom’” (qtd. in Farzad 354).<sup>32</sup>

Iran's eight long years of resistance to an international coalition that threatened the existence of its newly established Islamic republic had as its consequence a transcendental aesthetic event, outside the boundaries of the material world. How could martyrdom, a mystical and mysterious concept that “paralyzes logic [...] weakens speech [and] it even makes thinking difficult” be explained or represented? How could this “mixture of a refined love and a deep,

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<sup>30</sup> Hatami-kia made three short films between 1984 and 1985: *Torbat* (Sacred Soil), *Serat* (True Path ) and *Towqe Sorkh* (Red Collar). These films were mainly based on his personal experiences in the war and deployed mystical interpretations of participation in war. In most of these early films, such as *The Scout*(1990), in which even the name of the central character, Arefi, alluded to the spiritual self-quest of man in war, he emphasized on the Iran-Iraq war as a “sacred defense.”

<sup>31</sup> During the Revolution, Khomeini denounced both the United States and the Soviet Union as equally malignant forces in international politics. Revolutionaries considered the United States, because of its close association with the regime of the shah, posed the most serious danger to their revolution. Thus, they referred to the United States as the “Great Satan”.

<sup>32</sup> See Farzad, Narges. “Qeysar Aminpur and the Persian Poetry of Sacred Defence.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2007, p. 351.

complex wisdom [that] one cannot express [...] and so, as a result, one cannot do them justice,” be understood? Against the materialist world view, which could explain martyrdom as a violent and bloody annihilation of the body, symbolism seemed to be the most appropriate form that could represent the values of revolution and war. For the concept so divine, symbolism which rejected the conventions of Naturalism could reflect on an emotion or idea rather than represent the natural world in the objective, pseudo-scientific method embodied by Realism and Impressionism, unless the realist narrative confirmed a homogenous religious nationalism revelation at the sight of bloody death.

Literary representations of war in prose that are sympathetic to the notion of the sacred portray the spiritual identity of the fighters and their innocent but divine death. In these types of plots, there is an element of unexpected divine assistance to those sacrificial pure souls at the time of helplessness and despair. The main characters are always the fighters or their loved ones and they are shown to carry a certain light in their being that illuminates the ambience of the story, they disseminate love, devotion, forgiveness, and hope in their surroundings and to whomever they come into contact. Although realist in narrative, these types of literary works see participation in war as a duty and responsibility of the people in confronting the oppressing evil enemy. Confrontation with death in these stories and novels is a central quality with which they become uniquely different and recognizable from those negative and cynical representations of war. The material wounding in these realist narratives carries with it an interpretation of events that juxtapose the binaries of simplistic notions of good and evil. Death in war against the infidel is the greatest grace that God bestows on a special man, a happiness that not everyone has the virtue to accomplish, but men of God leave behind all the glamour of the material world and accept this grace and glory with open arms. The extraordinary patience and endurance of the

martyrs' mothers, resistance of the prisoners of war in the camps, self-sacrifice of the wives of the wounded and disabled, and the stark contrast between the empty lives of worldly men and the moral world of men of God were some of the thematic subjects in literature of Sacred Defense.<sup>33</sup>

### **Traumatic Realism and Post-Traumatic Representation of the Iran-Iraq War**

Like the Holocaust or Shoah, names created to describe the specificity of the extermination of Jews in Europe, the war against Iran was branded as a Holy War and Sacred Defense.<sup>34</sup> In Holocaust studies, a strategic opposition has been drawn between the sacralized and desacralized representations of this historical event, the former corresponding to a modernist aesthetic and the latter to a postmodern one (Rothberg, *TR* 5). The discourse of “modern and sacralization” can be found in Elie Wiesel’s writing; he assigns a “religious significance to the events of the Holocaust”, seeing it as “equal to the revelation at Sinai”. Wiesel has even suggested that “attempts to desanctify or demystify the Holocaust are subtle forms of anti-Semitism” (qtd. in Rothberg, *TR* 5). In contrast, Rothberg relates the unknowable nature of this event, i.e. the desacralization of the Holocaust, to the postmodern tendency to place it in “relation to the circumstances of its representation in the present, eschewing the stance of an objective observer who registers timeless truth” (Apel 7). He applies this postmodern analysis to

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<sup>33</sup> *Nakhlhaye Bisar*, (Headless Palms) by Ghasem Ali Ferasat, *Pole Moallagh* (Hanging Bridge) and *Oghabhaye Tappeh Shast* (Eagles of Hill Sixty) by Mohammad Reza Bayrami, *Khaneye Sefid* (White House) by Y. Miandoabi, *Sorood-e Mardan-e Aftab* (Men of the Sun’s Anthem, *Toloo dar Ghorroob* (Dawn in the West) by Ranjbar Gol Mohammadi are among these literary representations of a sacred war.

<sup>34</sup> In the case of Iran, war has been named by the official discourse as Jang-e Eslam va Kofr (The Battle of Islam Against Infidelity), Emtehan-e Elahi (the Devine Test) Nabard-e Hagh Alayh-e Batel (The battle of Right against Wrong) and Defa-e Moghaddas ( the Holy or Sacred Defense). See Khorrami, Mohammad Mehdi. “Narratives of Silence: Persian Fiction of the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War.” *Moments of Silence: Authenticity in the Cultural Expressions of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*, edited by Arta Khakpour et al., New York University Press, 2016, pp. 217–235.

any historical event that has been subject to a religious association, and Iran's war is certainly one of them.

The notion of the "Sacred Defense" in the context of the Iran-Iraq war, like the Holocaust, points to its already mystified and sacralized nature, a tendency which almost immediately obliterates any postmodern understanding of the historical catastrophe and its aftermath. Naming this history as "sacred" places it outside the boundaries of analysis and criticism; in consequence, any attempt at more secular ways of understanding becomes analogous to corruption and a disbelief in God and the afterlife, blocking any attempt at alternative representations of post-traumatic culture in Iran.

As outlined in the previous section and analyzed in detail in each chapter, sacralizing the war has created such stark binaries that even in death soldiers are segregated as martyrs in their graveyards, which are given titles such as "The Flower Garden of Martyrs" or "Martyr's Paradise" (Talebi 128), further indications of a culture created around the glorification of death in war. These numerous memorials also supplement the sacralization that surrounds the nature of this war and anything related to it. State-supported forms of cultural production similarly praise the sacrificial act and heroic death of these martyrs, as if the event has only one story to tell and the story that it tells has only one meaning. The state-sponsored, one-dimensional narrative of the events, whether historical or representational, has been the focus of historians such as Hayden White who argue that even historical interpretation is subjective and under the influence of personal views and creative imagination of the historians, and even more so is affected by cultural bias.

Hayden White has pointed to the confusion of "facts" becoming the "meaning" of an event in historical inquiry; he argues instead for an understanding of history where facts simply

provide the basis for “arbitrating among a variety of different meanings that different groups can assign to an event for different ideological or political reasons” (21). The Iran-Iraq war, like many other wars, was deemed to be a conflict between good and evil, between the corrupt and the righteous, thus the facts of imperial and colonial politics as well as the politics of resistance and defense engendered a national identity closely related to Eshragh, (*Illumination*), *a school of Islamic philosophy*. The historical and material reality of the war gave rise to an additional immaterial meaning. In such an outlook, where the facts of brutal death are linked to nonmaterial concepts beyond logic and reason, representing a post-traumatic life can become a political dilemma, especially where the material existence of trauma negates the possibility of comprehension and representation and gets in the way of the narratives of national unity and revolutionary identity promoted in anti-colonial conflicts.<sup>35</sup> The founding revolutionary thought in anti-colonial struggles inspired by Fanon places an emphasis on the role of a national culture in strengthening national unity against the colonizer. But Fanon also warned against its limited role. He pointed to a paradox: “national identity,” while vital to the development of a Third World revolution, can paradoxically restrict such efforts at liberation because it re-inscribes an essentialist, totalizing, and fetishized understanding of “nation” rather than inspiring a nuanced articulation of an oppressed people’s cultural heterogeneity across class lines.<sup>36</sup>

Such homogeneity, that is praised and pursued by the authority, directs all forms and genres of representation toward a unified interpretation of the events. Along with the demands of the institutionalized cultural industry, the artists and authors seem to be too disconnected from the reality of those surviving groups who present a nuanced definition and interpretation of the

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<sup>35</sup> The significance of the association of material with non-material abstract is Ellaine Scarry’s theme in *The Body in Pain* and will be discussed in the third chapter, “Trauma’s Resistance to Narrative.”

<sup>36</sup> See Frantz Fanon’s “On National Culture,” in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, New York, Grove Press, 1977.

events through their day-to-day living with post-traumatic conditions. This can be seen in the case of Iran where, despite the thousands of cases of documented PTSD and of individuals with severe mental and physical disability, the art and literature of the war genre largely neglected this group of people through their inadequate representation or, at worst, no representation at all of their suffering. A 1994 study indicated that ninety-two percent of patients who were hospitalized during and after the war for traumatic stress disorders still suffered from the symptoms. Confusingly, however, these same patients were considered entirely cured upon release. Another study published in 2018 comparing the cognitive deficiencies of veterans with chronic PTSD with those of healthy participants showed a significant difference in cognitive impairment between the veterans with PTSD and healthy subjects.<sup>37</sup> These psychiatric and physical impairments do not remain limited to the body of the affected soldier, the circle of injuries widens into their familial space and into their communities and wider societies.<sup>38</sup> Material realizations of trauma always extend beyond the personal into the societal and political. My aim in this research is to highlight the material existence of traumatically injured human subjects and emphasize the interconnectedness and significance of the material injury and its representation in shaping and connecting fields of knowledge within societies and between cultures. It argues that questioning these established knowledge structures may indeed, as Rothberg points out, open up

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<sup>37</sup> See Maddahi, Mohammad Ebrahim. "Review of Developments and Characteristics of PTSD Caused by Imposed War on Iran." *Basij Strategic Studies: Political Science*, Vol 1. Jan 1994. pp. 131-152. See also, Samadi, Rajab et al. "Executive Function and Attention Deficits in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Study on Iranian War Veterans." *Iranian Rehabilitation Journal*, vol. 16, no.1, Mar. 2018, pp. 17–24.

<sup>38</sup> See Vagharseyyedin, Seyyed A. "Experiences of Wives of Iranian War Veterans with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Regarding Social Relationships." *Public Health Nursing*, vol. 32, no. 2, pp. 122–131. Also see Cozza, Stephen, et al. "Family-Centered Care for Military and Veteran Families Affected by Combat Injury." *Clinical Child & Family Psychology Review*, vol. 16, no. 3, Sept. 2013, pp. 311–321.



“alternative avenues for exploring the intersections of the psychic and the social, the discursive and the material, and the extreme and the everyday” (Rothberg, *TR* 6).

In order to provide a framework for thinking about the intricacies of understanding and representing the Holocaust, Rothberg identified three fundamental requirements for its comprehension and representation: “a demand for documentation, a demand for reflection on the formal limits of representation, and the demand for the risky public circulation of discourses on the events” that are not coming from a spiritual or transcendental source, but from a social nature (*TR* 7). The demands regarding representation, as Rothberg notes, arise from the victims, from spectators, and from the generations born after the traumatic histories, each of whom want to engage with the events that caused the confrontation between history and culture. Artists, historians, literary critics, and the interested public face similar dilemmas with all these demands and need to be aware of how stories and images addressing specific events circulate in educational institutions, media, and in popular culture. (*TR* 7)

In order to address any specific historical trauma in a broader theoretical conversation about literary representations of such events, and to work out that antagonism between modernism and realism in transparent documentations of history such as but not limited to the Holocaust, Rothberg suggests a connection between the “socio-aesthetic” categories of realism, modernism, and postmodernism, that we think of them not as styles and periods, but also as “persistent responses to the demands of history” (*TR* 9). Like the demands themselves that he deems social, the responses are also social. They provide the framework for the representation and interpretation of history. A text’s realist component is referring to and documenting the world: the modernist side questions the capability of the representation to document history

clearly; and its postmodern component responds to the economic and political circumstances of its emergence and public distribution. (*TR* 9)

Traumatic realism, beyond being a literary mode or genre of representation, “provides an aesthetic and cognitive solution to the conflicting demands” in the representation and understanding of traumatic historical events. “It mediates between the realist and antirealist positions” and it “marks the necessity of considering how the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of genocide intersect and coexist” (*TR* 9). Taking Rothberg’s perceptive approach to history and its consequences and effects on representation, and representation as a mode of understanding and responding to history, in the following chapters I examine three major literary responses to the Iran-Iraq war as well as its visual representation, mainly in paintings of canonical art of war and revolution. The antagonism between the institutionalized commemoration of Iran’s war within Iran, which sought to link the facts of historical reality with the desired meaning arising from those events, and the postmodern public demand and thirst for a different way of understanding and engagement with its history presents a dilemma that needs to be addressed. Established modes of understanding advocate for an impossible way of understanding by linking the factual destruction and mutilation, pain and suffering with the spiritual, transcendental, and immaterial concepts of redemption, regeneration, and sacrificial martyrdom, where the post-war world, the generations born after the events, and those victims suffering the material consequences of the war need a mediated approach that can address the historical facts with its material consequences and, at the same time, the immaterial and unrepresentable experience of pain. The unspeakable and immaterial in this sense, as deconstructive as it might seem, does not allude to immaterial theology or teleological closure, rather it circles back to the material limitations, the limits of linguistic capabilities of representing the traumatic and the painful real.

While those who fight in support of the purported cause of wars have historically been remembered in only one specific way, the literary and artistic representations of war specifically written and produced by those who have experienced its traumatic violence tend to depict a reality that is not nearly so black and white.

The artistic forms I have selected for analysis in this dissertation provide different perspectives on war. Since my relationship to the artistic representation of the events of wars, and especially their aftermath, is based on my encounters with actual survivors who have not been favored in the official sermons, my aim is to bring to light internal and personal experience against the backdrop of events as well as the external, the living against the dead, as well as the post-traumatic experience of life after the events, both in relation to the social-political expression and representation of their experience. To do so, I scrutinize the literary modes of realism, modernism, and traumatic realism, the latter term as used by Rothberg, each utilized as tools for the representation of post-traumatic experience. The concept of traumatic realism is not presented starkly in all of the texts or each individual chapters, but I have set this larger system of modes of representation through the various chapters of this dissertation to address the realist, modernist, and traumatic realist varying responses to the demands of traumatic experience. In the analysis of the subject matter in selected materials, different forms of expression such as symbolism, surrealism, romanticism, and the grotesque will be discussed to evaluate the effectiveness of their employment in delivering the intended message by the writers and artists. For those in favor of sacralization of the war experience, especially in the field of the visual arts, symbolism connects the material real with the unseen and abstract concepts, because for the symbolists, the goal is usually not a complete or even accurate description of visual reality or an idea but the evocation or suggestion of the idea. Surrealism, specifically in the selected literary

works under investigation, mainly in Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Crytal Garden*, becomes a tool for expressions of extraordinary in the midst of realist narrative to present a different truth, a truth that nevertheless is rooted in the material and refers back to the material reality. As a cultural movement and development in the aftermath of World War I, Surrealism's method exposes a psychological truth and creates an image of what is beyond ordinary formal organization, a method more compatible with the nature of traumatic experience. Representation of traumatic memory and post-traumatic condition on its own terms and without employing surreal elements, as discussed in the very last chapter on short stories of Ahmad Dehghan, offers what a surreal image can represent in delivering a sense of bizarre and extraordinary. The reality itself becomes a raw statement, unmediated and factual, evoking a problematic and unkind relation of the society toward a grotesque and abject deformed body and abnormal psyche. After World War I and with the changing scene in the society with the deformed bodies of veterans with prosthetic body parts, the ancient decorative and medieval romantic concept of grotesques was increasingly displaced by the notion of hereditary deformity or medical abnormality. Following the post World War I tradition, realist representation of the grotesque places the shattered body of returning veterans to homefront as the thematic center of representation.<sup>39</sup>

In this research and analysis I argue that limiting war narratives to a one-dimensional, mystified, nationalist, and religious readings further isolates both the individual and the collective, preventing them from engaging in a transcultural dialogue with other survivors and victims of trauma, when the only way out of the suffocating effects of a post-traumatic experience is through communication and developing empathic relationships. As they merge post-traumatic life with ordinary reality and historical events, the authors and artists whose

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<sup>39</sup> For more on grotesque, see Dickerman, Leah, and Brigid Doherty. *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris*. 2005. See also Leah Dickerman, *Dada*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2005, pp. 3-4.

works I analyze respond to the cultural and political causes and effects of war through the suffering body and its vulnerability to loss and violence. The juxtaposition in their work of internal, unspeakable pain and external conditions of ordinary life retells the historical past through its aftermath and consequently negates the normalization of violence and war, as well as its post-traumatic effect, through a mystified and theologized redemptive justification.

Rothberg has suggested that particularizing an event and its history, “separating it off from other histories of collective violence – and even from history as such – is intellectually and politically dangerous,” since the notion of uniqueness creates a “hierarchy of suffering and removes that suffering from the field of historical agency, [which is] both morally and intellectually offensive” (*Multidirectional Memory* 9). In the literary texts and visual art included in my analysis, I draw parallels from different contexts to engage survivors of war in dialogic interaction that allows for the multi-directionality of memory and the continual reconstruction of the subjects and the public spaces in which they reside.

### **Chapter Descriptions**

In the first chapter I focus on painting, photography, and film. In order to analyze visual representations of post-traumatic suffering in the tradition of Iranian painting referred to as the Art of the Sacred Defense, as well as the more secular lens found in photography and film, I draw parallels with other artistic depictions of war, including the depiction of human suffering in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), expressions of brutality in Germany during World War I, and the representation of exile and displacement of the Palestinians after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. In this chapter I argue, in reference to the Iran-Iraq war, that the symbolic visual representation of the body and psyche in pain (the dominant and official mode of representation) fails to grasp and even totally neglects the reality of the individual experience of

suffering in everyday life because it insists on representing the beauty of spiritual and sacrificial life after death, cross-referencing religious historical icons, and promoting silence through resilience. I suggest that this form of representation – an example of what postcolonial scholars refer to as regional and cultural ways of coping with trauma that defers from and defies Western understanding – it particularizes an event to the point of forcing a homogenized understanding of it, with no reference to its aftermath. Unlike the Iranian photographers and filmmakers I discuss, whose focus on traumatic experiences is intended to provoke their audience, Iranian painters of post-traumatic life have yet to develop ways of engaging with the viewer or turning the inward gaze of their subjects outward in order to interact and engage with the social and global issue of post-traumatic consequences of war.

In the second chapter, I analyze *Gunḡišk'hā bihišt Rā mīfahmand* [*Sparrows Understand Heaven*] (2006), a modernist novel that highlights the value of narrating traumatic memory and imagery in order to resolve what remains an unresolved loss within the psyche. In this novel, without crossing the borders of external events into the internal psyche and emotions, external events are recounted from the point of view of a photojournalist, and they manage nevertheless to shed doubt on the truth of the historical narrative. As the narrator of the novel, the photojournalist uses a number of forms – his own documentary film, photography, and pictorial description of scenes of conflict from his memory in fragmented and distorted narrative. Like the visual art in the first chapter, I demonstrate how this visually detailed novel paints a fragmented canvas of heroic acts but that, despite employing such a traditional frame, it tends to work through and pass beyond the romanticized narrative of war towards a realistic version of events. The narrative of the scenes follows the tone and style of coffee house painting and *naghali*, a traditional and dramatic storytelling of myths and epics. With extreme modernist distortion and

fragmentation, the author buries the human side of his historical characters in the rubble and ruins of his dismembered storytelling. The author's refuge in surrealism during the novel's concluding moments blurs the lines of reality and fiction, of realism and modernism, and resists the conventional culture of heroism that surrounds the image of a martyr. The conflicting voices of the journalist, protagonist, and novelist, and their contrasting claims of ownership of the truth, opens the space for criticism, disagreement, and differing interpretations to evolve.

In the third chapter I analyze Mohsen Makhmalbaf's early novel *Bagh-e-Boloor, Crystal Garden* (1986), a work that creates a world in which the victims cease to be visible to us because of the impossibility of materializing the invisible, interior states of their physical and psychological pain. At the center of this novel, women and veterans with PTSD are portrayed in psychoanalytically vivid realist fashion. Traumatic experience coexists with the dystopic everyday life of the characters, who are each situated in an enclosed corner of a huge confiscated house. Makhmalbaf's psychoanalytic excavations of the minds of his characters parallel the excavation of a human body from a grave. Their interior torment is no less chaotic than the external material world in which they pass their days. The seemingly exaggerated surreality of the condition of life in the text is due to the author's acute sensitivity to the need for materializing the unseen and untouchable dimensions of misery. War causes loss, and loss causes a cryptic void in human consciousness and destroys people's lives. Makhmalbaf does not hide the pain of loss and poverty or the darkness of destruction under the symbolic representation of resistance. Though the consequences are real, realism cannot cope with containing the incomprehensibility of suffering. Surrealism is the only tool that can put the unseen of the post-traumatic side by side with the reality of everyday life.

The fourth and last chapter begins with the premise that historical trauma is always personalized by “exploring its effects in bodily violations and wounds” (Vickroy 168). In Ahmad Dehghan’s collection of short stories in *Man Ghatel-e Pesaretan Hastam, A Vital Killing* (2011), the body occupies, finally, the central stage in narratives of war and becomes a testimony to the unredeemable effects of the Iran-Iraq war, thirty years after the armistice. The torturous space between life and death that his socially marginal characters, veterans, and their loved ones experience negates any ideological and religious claim to a sacred war and instead highlights the unhealed wounds that remain in or on the body. The wounded body and psyche in Dehghan’s collection becomes the contestable site of moral, ethical, and historical truth: only through the suffering body and psyche of the victims can the social and political be brought into the light. As a survivor of war himself, Dehghan’s graphic scenes of despair become a testimony, not to the heroism of the dead, but to what post-traumatic life really is for the living survivors, where the past becomes the point of reference and analysis only to the extent of its relationship to the present. The grotesque and abject life of veterans that Dehghan portrays in this collection is the ultimate material and physical reality of the post-traumatic life of war’s survivors. His realist accounts of survival guilt, loss, and the permanent wounds that are registered in a very short and simplified narrative represent war and most importantly its aftermath as an object of knowledge worthy of scrutiny and re-examination. His characters are dehumanized, unnamed, and so brutally objectified that the binaries of the real and surreal becomes confusing. The narratives explore and exemplify the unspeakable tragedy of surviving an immediate death and having to live through the painstaking reality of survival. Dehghan’s stories call attention to the social, cultural, political, and economic forces that degrade the victims of war and at the same time promise the salvation of their souls.



My discussion of the selected texts might be considered counterintuitive to the culture of resistance promoted by postcolonial scholars and revolutionary ideologies that represent and persist in the idea of individual trauma as a mere aspect of the unbending collective struggle and resistance against colonial and neo-imperial politics. But in this dissertation, I have set out to demonstrate that deconstructing and representing the psychological and physical torment that ordinary human beings tolerate for the larger collective is the first step in bringing the imperial and colonial perpetrator to justice and initiating social and political change for marginal groups. The postcolonial world's obsession with separating and setting itself against colonial and imperial oppression has sacrificed the individual to the charade of a collective identity, oblivious to the fact that the individual is a foundational building block of the collective. The notion of the absent, unspeakable, unrepresentable, and interminable experience of trauma in my analysis, paradoxical as it might seem, does not necessarily produce purely negative consequences. Indeed, it points to one of Caruth's most compelling insights about trauma: that "to the extent trauma opens up a rupture in experience, comprehension, and understanding, it also opens up possibilities for new experiences and modes of understanding" (Marder 2-3). For Caruth, the very structure of repetition inherent in "traumatic belatedness" compels the traumatized person to survive the trauma by finding ways of bearing witness to it. As LaCapra suggests, acting out an excess of emotions as a result of traumatic suffering opens possibilities for political and social criticism, while at the same time it reserves the right of individuals to mourn their loss and communicate their pain and suffering. The impossible and incomprehensible nature of the traumatic experience is a space in which neither homogenous nor completely particularistic elucidations of experience can take place. "What the text does, as opposed to what it says,"

Rothberg notes in his analysis of Charlotte Delbo's *None of Us Will Return*, is an attempt towards

some form of communication even when it claims that the experience it relates is incomprehensible. This attempt at communication, at testimony, is above all else ethical – that is, it *should* be undertaken, even if the value of its results is far from obvious, and even if what is communicated is the very failure or limit of communication. (TR 162)

The impossibility of communicating the internal torment of and individuality of suffering is a cry for help, a disruption in the life of a non-survivor, a bridge between the personal and the social, a demand from the witness, bystander, and the reader for recognition, empathy, and intervention. The representation of the coexistence of the experience of suffering with the everyday, which is the reality of life for a survivor, is the traumatic realist's attempt to expose the continuity of the traumatically real as opposed to a "facile embrace of closure and coherence found in the typical realist narrative" (Rothberg, TR 106) and its symbolic association with a definitive redemptive conclusion.

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# CHAPTER 1

## VISUAL ARTS OF POST-TRAUMATIC CULTURE: THE BODY IN THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

Artists who live and work with spiritual values cannot and should not remain indifferent to a conflict in which the highest values of humanity and civilization are at risk.

—Picasso to the American Artists' Congress, 1937 (Leighen, 41)

The key to the survivor experience, the basis for all survivor themes, is the imprint of death.

(Lifton, 480)

I never carried a rifle  
On my shoulder  
Or pulled a trigger.  
All I have  
Is a flute's melody  
A brush to paint my dreams,  
A bottle of ink.  
All I have  
Is unshakable faith  
And an infinite love  
*For my people in pain.* (my emphasis)

Tawfiq Zayyad (1932-1994)

Cathy Caruth has suggested that at the heart of traumatic narrative there is “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life; between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (*Unclaimed Experience* 7). Utilizing a comparative approach to post-traumatic visual arts in the aftermath of war, this chapter is focused on the ways in which the everyday violence of surviving a traumatic event is visualized in the postwar era of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988. This investigation borrows Michael Rothberg’s concept of “traumatic realism” to suggest a need for a more universal approach to the post-traumatic condition of individuals in order to resist the appropriation of the human body for a political scheme or, as Dominick LaCapra puts it, to

“convert trauma into the occasion for sublimity, to transvalue it into a test of the self or the group and an entry to the extraordinary” (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 23). Without foregoing the historical and cultural specificities of traumas of non-white populations and the role of Western imperialism and colonialism in events of a traumatic nature, I suggest that the institutionalized dominant symbolic representation of traumatic history has resulted in silencing and marginalizing its living survivors. Traumatic realist representation, on the other hand, by foregrounding the entanglement of ordinary, everyday life and extraordinary nature of post-traumatic crisis can give voice to the marginalized and silenced, suffering survivors and further help their integration into society from their liminal positions. Contemporary intellectuals and artists need to address the silence of the survivors and adopt a more dynamic form of representation to make these invisible individuals visible. In my analysis of the visual culture of the Iran-Iraq war, I attempt to reconcile the assumed differences between colonized and colonizing cultures in the experience of pain and suffering, whether physical or psychological, by embracing a view of the universality of human experience under extreme conditions in which the human body is at its most vulnerable. Like Rothberg, I argue for the need to supplement the “event-based model of trauma” that has been the prevailing model in the past with a model “that can account for ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence as well” (“Decolonizing Trauma Studies” 226). This everyday violence includes the physical and psychological consequences of a traumatic past, distant or near, that evades the life of the subject in the present. As Rothberg asserts, “theory needs to globalize itself more thoroughly and responsibly” (“Decolonizing Trauma Studies” 226) and in doing so, to include the excluded screams of everyday suffering of all people and to stand against a nationalistic, separatist Eastern versus Western dichotomy, without necessarily sacrificing the cultural and historical differences of the

subjects. Cathy Caruth's idea that "trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures," ("Trauma and Experience: Introduction" 3-12) further suggests the importance of taking similarities rather than differences as the point of departure. The similarities of the physical and psychical functions of the body – which is a post-traumatic body, a disabled body, a body in pain – is the central focus of this chapter.

### **The Western and European Body in the Aftermath of War**

In 2003, many years after its initial creation, the reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* that hangs in the lobby of the United Nation's Security Council in New York was covered with a blue curtain when then Secretary of Defense Colin Powell addressed the UN, in anticipation of the planned bombing of Baghdad. This censoring act not only demonstrated the fundamental and inherent contradictions of political decisions and human values, it also showed the fear of the immense moral and ethical influence this iconic painting might have had on viewers at a time when the U.S was embarking on an imperial adventure in Iraq. The politicians knew that the image, with its mutilated and shrieking men, women, children, and animals, had the power to raise awareness about the contradictions between the language of imperial power and the message of Picasso's art.

Years later in 2015, in his book, *War is Beautiful*, David Shields compiled a series of war photographs that appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* from the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq between 2003-2015. The book is the result of his "enchanted and infuriated" state of mind when confronted with those images. According to Shields, the *Times* "uses its front-page war photographs to convey that a chaotic world is ultimately under control, encased within amber. In so doing, the paper of record promotes its institutional power as

protector/curator of death-dealing democracy.” “This” *he writes* “is why I no longer read *The New York Times*” (*Shield* 7-9).

Many other artists’ visions, including Otto Dix’s (1891–1969) expressions of war-time experience in Germany, had the same fate as *Guernica* in the UN lobby. Dix’s works were not immune to censorship after the end of World War I and during the Weimar Republic, despite his having been a volunteer and an active participant in WWI and a recipient of a medal of honor for his service. Overwhelmingly affected by the sights of the war, he started to have persistent nightmares in which he crawled through destroyed houses. He represented his traumatic experiences in many succeeding works, including a portfolio of fifty etchings called *Der Krieg*, published in 1924 and inspired by the great Spanish artist Francisco Goya’s *Disasters of War*. Not even his medals saved him from being labeled “degenerate” by the Fascist authority, to the point that his 1923 painting *The Trench*, which mainly depicted mutilated and decomposed bodies of soldiers in battle, was veiled behind a curtain in the Wallraf-Richartz Museum, the purchase of the painting was canceled, and the director of the museum was forced to resign. The German artist’s fascination with skeletons, empty eye sockets, skulls, and worms wriggling in human nostrils recreate his vision of war’s horrible consequences. Dix stated that he aimed “to demonstrate that genuine human heroism lies in overcoming senseless death” (Hagen, qtd. in Karcher 23). His paintings send the message that death in war is grotesque; it dismantles and annihilates. Dix’s *The Wounded Man* is reminiscent of plate 69 in Goya’s *The Disasters of War* series which Goya titled, “‘Nothing!’ That is what it says”. Both show the horrors and absurdity of death in battle. As an eyewitness to some of the most dreadful events of the First World War, Dix puts them on the record: “these were the expressions on the faces of the wounded” (Forward 1). In *House Destroyed by Aircraft Bombs*,



like Goya's *Ravages of War*, Dix shows civilian casualties subject to indignity. In both prints there is a dead woman on her back with her head hanging down towards the viewer with her legs apart, and behind her another dead woman is hanging down towards the viewer on her front. In both cases there is a dead child in the foreground. War dismantles the body. War humiliates the body. Dix's depictions of legless and disfigured veterans – a common scene in Germany's streets in the 1920s – expose another ugly side of war by illustrating the forgotten condition of these men in German society (*Utopia/Dystopia*). A similar theme is represented in Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Wolfgang Borchert's *The Man Outside*, as well as Wilfred Owen's poems, particularly in "Disabled" and "Mental Cases". Although the works of Picasso, Goya, and Dix appear in different historical, political, and cultural contexts, they all depict the human subject as a target of indignity and humiliation.

Whether abstract, realist, or surrealist (as in Salvador Dali's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans* (1936) in which individuals in the Spanish Civil War are depicted with distorted limbs and agonizing expressions), art that acts like a "whistle-blower" to use Jonathan Glover's term, is not simply a passive sign or reference to a particular history or a certain ideology. Art has the power and agency to bring to life a certain kind of thought and to change and challenge normalizing conventions. It has the ability to move people, "to witness without speaking and to make it difficult to sustain ignorance or innocence in the face of suffering" (Campbell, qtd. in Craven part II). Censorship that artists like Picasso and Dix were subjected to shows that there is a fear that art can become a "civilizing force that erases national boundaries and strengthens human solidarity" (Guerin and Hallas, qtd. in Craven part II). Humans and animals, civilians and warriors are all slaughtered alike in *Guernica*, shown within a closed frame of darkness that offers no escape, no beacon of hope or redemption. Picasso's *Guernica*, like Goya's *Disasters*

series, is devoid of light. For Picasso, both spirituality and conventional religion turn out to be pointless in the chaos of war. *Guernica* reflects Picasso's cynicism about Christian motifs, iconography, martyrdom, and notions of redemption. The all-too-familiar source of illumination that shines from above in Christian narratives is turned into a death-bearing light, a lamp shaped like an eye that is watching, and yet has brought chaos and death to the living creatures below. The dove of peace and freedom that usually delivers the message of hope and regeneration is screaming with its wide-open beak. The hero or the beheaded warrior lays with a broken sword in his mutilated hand. The soft contour of the iconic Virgin Mary of the *Pietà* is turned into a screaming mother with pointed and piercing edges; a mother that, unlike Mary, cries out a scream with a tongue sharp like a sword (Rosenblum 46-48). This depiction of the absolute vulnerability of all species in the face of war's brutalities lacks adherence to any particular ideology; *Guernica* is "the picture of all bombed cities"<sup>40</sup> giving a universal face to anguish, pain, and suffering.

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<sup>40</sup> In the first Spanish monograph on Picasso, published in Madrid in 1951, the author described *Guernica* as "the picture of all bombed cities."



Figure 1. Pablo Picasso. Guernica.

Over one hundred years earlier, Francisco Goya, disillusioned with the promises of the Enlightenment, painted the *Disasters of War* series, comprised of 82 prints executed from 1810-1820, in which he depicts the meaningless of human against human brutality. Goya was called upon to record the “glorious exploits” during the siege of the Saragosa by Napoleon’s army, but he saw nothing glorious in the chaotic conflict (Gassier et al. 217). The *Disasters of War series* shows how limited the human imagination is in thinking about others.<sup>41</sup> Goya doesn’t take sides with either party to the conflict; his drawings are detached and reflective. Civilians are the central targets of the brutality, yet they are not portrayed as heroes. They are shown both as victims of indignity and humiliation and as cruel and bloodthirsty. Like *Guernica*, Goya’s

<sup>41</sup> See also Goya’s *The Colossus or A Giant* (1808-12). The gigantic figure, it’s been said, symbolizes war, from which all creature and human are running away in disorder. See also *Saturn* (1820-23), a symbol of destruction which was also painted on the walls of his house.

etchings are devoid of color, and, as Susan Sontag puts it, he “eliminates all the trappings of the spectacular, the landscape becomes an atmosphere, a darkness barely sketched in. War is not a spectacle” (44). The *Disasters of War* series was not displayed in public, it was found and published posthumously in 1863. His vision was considered too dark for the Spanish authorities, who wanted to maintain the legitimacy of their power by representing the world as a safe place. The experience of pain, suffering, and death is perhaps the central common ground that all humans share in life, yet that substantial commonality is usually altered in art’s dialogical relationship with social, political, and cultural thought. The raw emotions associated with the physical or psychological experience of suffering and the difficulty of communicating those emotions are easily discredited in the interest of promoting and sustaining hegemonic narratives.

### **The Crucified Body in the Arts of the Islamic Revolution**

With more than half a million deaths and casualties, the Art of Revolution and Sacred Defense became the dominant, state-sponsored genre that chose the symbolic form of representation to establish an uplifting and spiritual meaning for pain and suffering that the nation endured during the war. In the symbolic process, the meaning lies elsewhere than in the material reality. On the issue of the omission of the material reality of pain and suffering in the art of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran’s director of the Howze Honari Visual Art Center stated, “War is beautiful for us. Westerners see only the surface, the dismembered bodies, bloodshed, and absurdity of death. We see the world differently. We see the beauty of sacrifice for a great cause. War was imposed on us, and we resisted to our last drop of blood. Pain and suffering is not important for us”.<sup>42</sup> This statement illustrates the strong opposition to and blunt criticism of the

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<sup>42</sup> Ghodrati. Maryam. Personal Interview. 20 August 2014.

Western philosophy of individualism with its emphasis on the worth and moral value of individual versus the collective. Morteza Goodarzi Dibaj's view, which represents the dominant philosophy of the Islamic Republic in regard to the consequences of the Iran-Iraq war, resonates with postcolonial critiques of Western trauma theory. Both the Islamic Republic and postcolonial theory point to neglect of the trauma of colonialism and the Western trauma theory's narrow focus on the psychologization of the trauma inflicted by the colonizers. In this criticism, the Western conception of trauma relies on gaining linguistic authority over the subject's pain and suffering and emphasizes immaterial recovery-psychological healing rather than focusing on the social complexities and cultural influences involved in the experience of trauma, its representation, and the process of recovery. One of the leading theorists of colonialism and postcolonialism, Frantz Fanon, who was also a practicing psychiatrist, emphasized the collective, social, and religious significance of traumatic history against the Euro-Western conceptions of the world, and its consequences for the lives of affected groups.

After the Islamic revolution of 1979, obliged by the utopian ideals for society under Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership, filmmakers began engaging with new revolutionary ideologies, such as the mass production of propaganda representing the divine and praising the values of the revolution. The war genre known as Cinema for Sacred Defense developed as a persuasive media practice under the close watch of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These films had the goal of sacralizing the war that followed the revolution in 1980 by representing it through moral and religious necessities. Similarly, Literature of Sacred Defense and the Art of

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The only comprehensive collection of paintings of the Islamic Revolution and Iran-Iraq war to date is compiled by the director of Howze Honari Visual Art Center in three volumes. Despite being a unique anthology, this collection still lacks serious analytical reflection on the art works and is more geared toward promotion of the Islamic and Revolutionary ideology. See Goodarzi, Dibaj Mostafa. *Committed Social and Religious Art in Iran: Paintings of Revolution*. Tehran, Farhangestan e Honar Publication, 2009.

Revolution simultaneously became the brands of the cultural productions of the Iran-Iraq war. Post-revolutionary politics, which closely adhered to that of the anti-colonial revolutionary theorists, remained fixed on revolutionary definitions of subjectivity that were unbending and inflexible despite the constant changing of historical and social circumstances. The post-revolution, post-war, and post-traumatic culture presented a different and changing dynamic of the human condition, especially for those affected by traumatic history. Despite the fact that today in Iran more than half a million people, twenty-nine years after the end of the war, still suffer the physical and psychological consequences of war such as chemical poisoning, PTSD, spinal cord injuries, and landmine amputations, the visual art representing these effects, especially the paintings, are devoid of that suffering. That void is presented more clearly in the large murals on city walls portraying the martyrs that serve as a constant reminder of the sacrificial losses that saved and revitalized the nation. The human body in the post-revolutionary era has become subjugated in propagandist politics in a way that obliterates the reality of suffering and promotes the aesthetics of religious regeneration in order to further the nationalistic and anti-imperialist identity of the establishment. The post-traumatic, mutilated body that suffers without conformity to the ideals of revolution and sacredness of war has become a marginalized body.

Iranian artists after the revolution were engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle to construct identity and subjectivity from the wreckage of a tragic historical past. As a result, many of the Iranian paintings produced during and after the Iran-Iraq War collapse the historical past of the artists' revolutionary Shiite identity with the present. Major Iranian contemporary painters such as Kazem Chalipa (1958 - ), known as the "artist of the revolution", depicts soldiers as *martyrs* of the Battle of Karbala (680 AD) – an uneven battle in which Hossein, the third Shiite

Imam, along with his brothers, his sons, and his seventy-two followers, were slain for standing up against the corrupt powers. Women in particular became iconic figures of patience and sacrifice, intended to present the nation as one strong unbending force against the *Satanic* forces of the world (Chelkowski and Dabashi 276-77).<sup>43</sup> The transcendental powers of patience, sacrifice, belief, and resistance are interwoven into the form, color, and content of Iranian post-revolutionary painting that signifies a non-materialist conception of the world. Kazem Chalipa's *Sacrifice* (1981), *Resistance* (1983), and *Desert* (1984) with their repetitive themes and styles are examples of the ideal revolutionary image of a woman (Afary 300).<sup>44</sup> These women mourn their losses with dignity and stoic patience, and they sacrifice their sons to the path of God in order to save humanity.

The status quo that prevails is that women, like men, had a definite role in wartime – supporting their men on the front lines. The women of the motherland are the heirs of Zeinab, Imam Hossein's sister, who accompanies him through the battle of Karbala and watches him and all her immediate family die a brutal death. Despite the brutal events she witnesses, however, she stands up against the corrupt authority, and when asked “How did you see the war?” she responds: “I saw nothing but beauty.” Chalipa follows the line of Zeinab's narrative in *Sacrifice* (Figure 2), where he paints beauty in the face of war, destruction, and mutilation.<sup>45</sup> The scene in

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<sup>43</sup> In *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi examine the ideological and propagandist machinery of visual production in Iran in the words of Ayatollah Khomeini, the charismatic leader of the Revolution, revolutionary posters, banners, murals, graffiti, songs, and oratorios, that was mobilized by the leading figures of the revolutionary movement.

<sup>44</sup> Afary's study of war widows shows how the state persuaded some women that giving up their sons as martyrs was cause for celebration and not mourning and also assured them that they themselves gained greater recognition in the eyes of the almighty (Afary, 300).

<sup>45</sup> Peter Chelkowski has included this art work in his article. See Chelkowski, Peter. “All's Not Quiet on the Western Front: Graphic Arts in the Iranian War Effort.” *Moments of Silence: Authenticity in the Cultural Expressions of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*, edited by Arta Khakpour et al., New York University Press, 2016, pp. 163–175. See also the Library of Chicago in *The Graphics of Revolution and War: Iranian Poster Arts* <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/graphics-revolution-and-war-iranian-poster-arts/>.

the painting invites the viewer in with its vibrant colors. The light of the eternal almighty at the top center of the frame shines on all the historical headless figures in white shrouds that stand symmetrically with hands on their chests in a gesture of respect to Imam Hossein. Imam Hossein on his iconic horse occupies the middle center of the frame, holding the Holy Quran to his heart in one hand and an upright sword on the other. The bluish white of upper half of the panel ties the historic battle of Karbala with the second half of the frame depicting the Iran-Iraq war in red. The devoted woman/mother/sister as the model of ultimate Islamic femininity stands at the center right beneath Hossein, the icon of martyrdom, linking the two as a continuous history. The woman cultivates martyrdom, supports the sons of the land in their selfless march, and holds a headless body in a form of offering. The grave expression on her face is turned inward by closed eyes and the color of her skin melts into the other colors of the scene. A dead soldier's body is transformed into a tulip—the symbol of martyrdom in Iranian Shi'i iconography—as his mother cradles him in a pose that is reminiscent of the Christian Pietà. To the mother's right is a row of tulips, developing embryonic soldiers, and on her left, they have become adult soldiers who willingly march towards the battlefields and towards their own deaths. The symmetrical arrangement of the subjects and the transformation of infants to sacrificial soldiers suggest a cycle of continuity in the culture of martyrdom and the eternal unity of Shi'i historical identity and revolutionary ideology (*New Battle of Karbala* Web). The story of war and death has a chronological timeline, with a beginning, middle, and end, and all its events have one specific meaning and purpose.





Figure 2. Kazen Chalipa. Sacrifice, 1981.

In Figure 3, Chalipa's *Resistance* (1983), a brush of red which is a reference to blood has turned the yellow of the wheat fields of the motherland, the background, and the sun in the horizon into orange. The soldiers who have risen in ghostly shapes from the blend of the land

march upright to leave the woman and the child at the center and the foreground of the frame to defend their dignity and identity. The color of their ethereal march behind the woman combines with a surrealist, Dali-like hand of the woman with the child in her arm. The destruction of the land is only symbolically present in the vibrant colors and the large hands of the woman which represent her extraordinary endurance and strength. Her closed eyes, similar to the eyes of woman in *Sacrifice* and *Desert*, turn her agony inward corresponding to the immaterial dreamlike landscape. Chalipa avoids eye contact between his subjects and the viewer and thus emphasizes the spiritual experience of war as opposed to the material striving and exposure to loss and pain involved. In *Desert* (1984) (Figure 4) the center of focus as in *Sacrifice* and *Resistance* is a woman with closed eyes, posing like the *Pietà*, large hands cradling an armful of red tulips as an icon of martyrdom. The melting red of blood with the yellow of desert foreground the orange scenery. In Chalipa's art the individual serves as the representative of the collective consciousness. War becomes a sacred and aesthetic zone. These paintings can be hung on the wall for adornment, and they need not be covered. There is no shame, disgust, or shock in the war they depict. They encourage the viewer to praise the beauty of stoic heroism.



Figure 3. Kazen Chalipa. Resistance, 1983.

While Chalipa paints women at the time of their sacrificial offering and inward mourning, Naser Palangi (1958- ), another renowned artist of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war, depicts the female combatants of the south as the heirs of Zeinab, women who heroically pick up arms to fight the occupation. Three paintings of women done in 1980 create a record of his observations of southern Iran, where the fighting was the most extreme as the Iraqi forces crossed the borders and occupied Iranian cities. (Figure 5) In each painting, only the upper bodies of the women are shown, all hold a rifle with a Dali-like hand, evoking their extraordinary power. Each possesses a stern and determined face, with eyes diverted away from the audience. In *A Woman Holding a Rifle*, the gaze is forward, and there are signs of destruction in the

background all blended in grey color in quick sketches. The contours of the woman's head and hand are recognizable. In the other two paintings the women's bodies dissolve into the background, with only their large hands, rifles, and resolute faces foregrounded. In both, the relentless uncompromising gaze of the women is directed upward while a destroyed landscape dissolves around their huge eyes and hands. Palangi's famous 1982 mural in five panels (Figure 6) painted on the walls of a bombed mosque and against the background of the destroyed city preserves the unity of Shiite revolutionary identity and Imam Hossein's culture of martyrdom in modern war.<sup>46</sup> The familiar sources of light—the green color, which is a symbol of the prophet Muhammad and his family, is now the color of the revolutionary guard's uniform, the painless sacrificial death of the soldiers, the mute mourning of women—are preserved today just as they were thirty years ago on the same wall. The fixation of identity, the disciplined practices that attach a specific identity to individuals and meld them into a collective identity, marginalizes not only those who did not experience the event, but more importantly, those whose post-traumatic conditions have forced them to depart from a singular, collectively held identity.

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<sup>46</sup> The only scholarly analysis of Iranian war painting I have found to date is written by Alice Bombardier. See Bombardier, Alice, and Nasser Palangi. "War Painting and Pilgrimage in Iran." *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 25 i-ii, Jan. 2012, pp. 148–166 and see also, Bombardier, Alice. "Iranian Revolutionary Painting on Canvas: Iconographic Study on the Martyred Body." *Iranian Studies: Journal of the International Society for Iranian Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4, July 2013, pp. 583–600.





Figure 4. Kazen Chalipa. Desert, 1984.

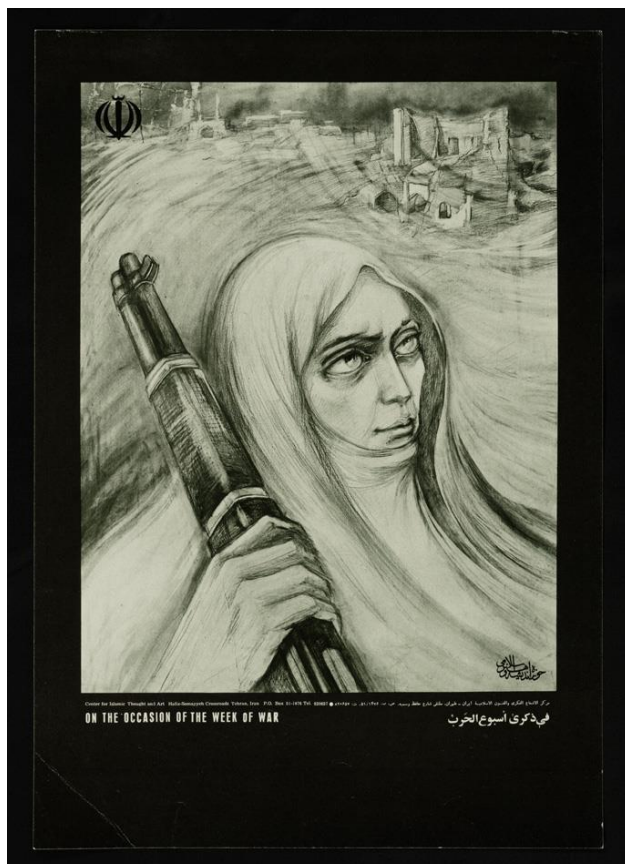
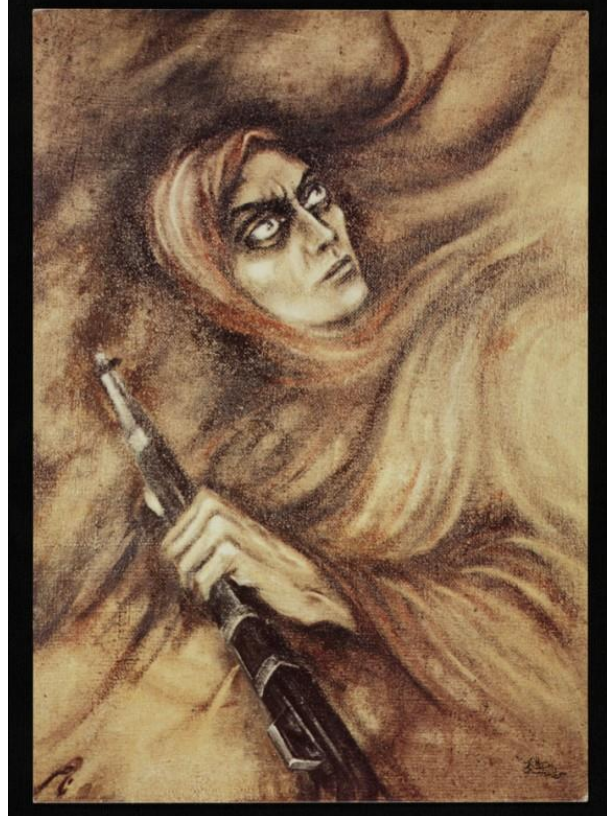


Figure 5. Nasser Palangi, 1980. Middle Eastern Posters Collection, Special Collections Research Center, The University of Chicago Library.





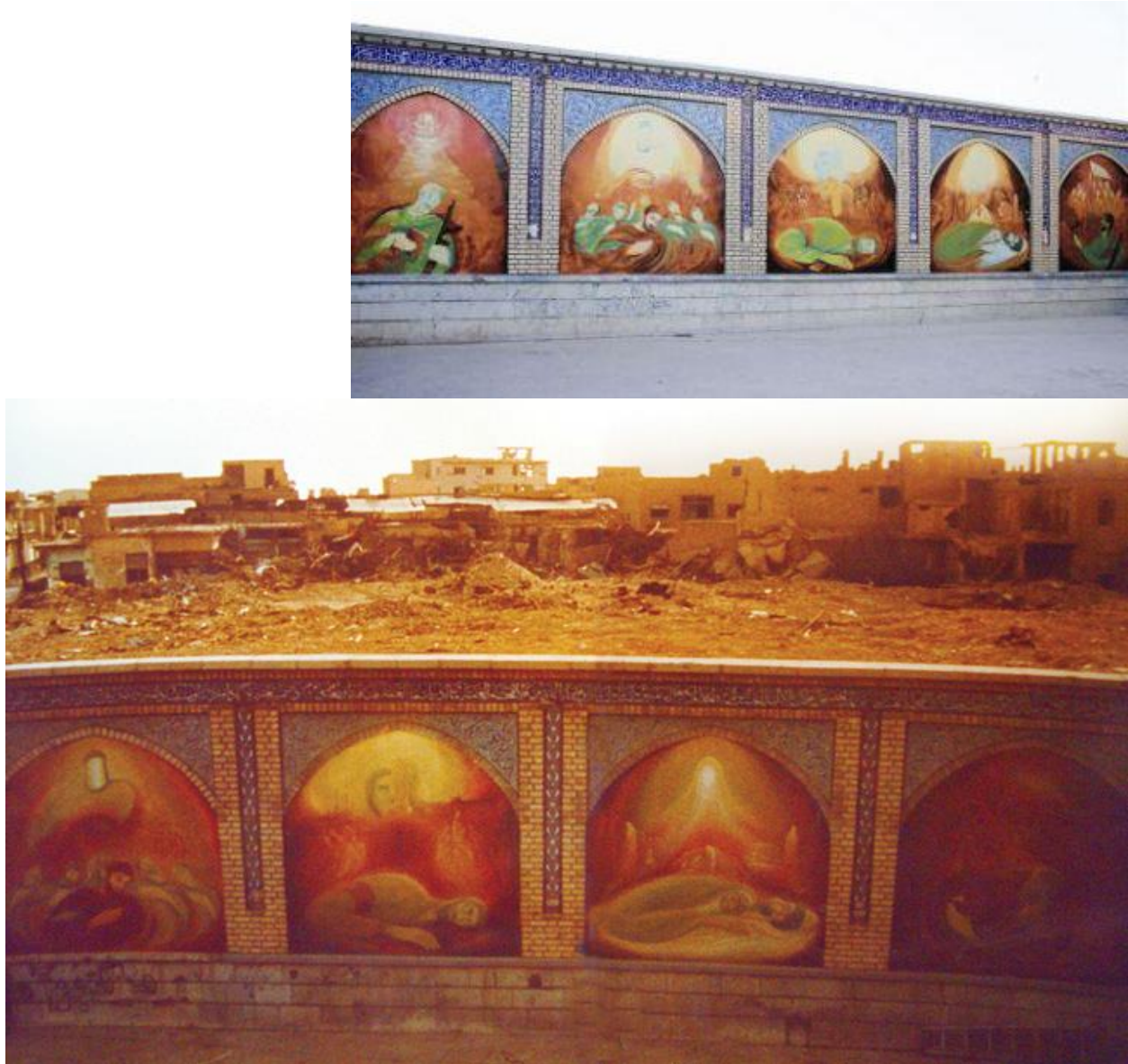


Figure 6. Naser Palangi. Khoramshahr's mosque, mural, 1982.

This fixation of identity in these women, which comes at the expense of their personal pain, is precisely what Goya works against in his etching plate number seven titled "What Courage!" (Figure 7) The scene depicted is based on a real event; the woman named Augustina Zaragoza is said to have defended the city when she realized that the Spanish militia had been killed or were too injured to fight. Goya does not shy away from depicting this heroine, who fires an iron cannon while making a stair out of a pile of bodies that lie on top of each other. Two

other plates (13 and 30) depict the humiliation that women suffer in scenes of rape. The savagery of war is at its worst in these series of plates. The woman, the mother, the sister, the motherland, the dignity of a nation and of a people, as well as the very concept of humanity are all raped in these scenes. War dismantles the body, humiliates the body, and in so doing alters the self. In Plate Fourteen, "The Way Is Hard," (Figure 8) Goya illustrates his disillusionment with the promises of the Enlightenment, and with the superstitious preaching of the Church. The title is taken from the Bible, "For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:14), but Goya makes a complete mockery of it in his drawing. A ladder stands in the middle of two poles that is supposedly a doorway or gateway. Surrounding the doorway is a display of dead or dying bodies, and dead men hang beyond the passageway, seemingly tied to the same two poles. It is not clear where the ladder in between the poles leans for support, since the top section of the frame is cut off. Three men are pulling and pushing another immobilized man up the ladder. A priest is standing on the side of the ladder looking at these struggling men with a smirk on his face while pointing upward with one hand. In a state of exhaustion and non-belief, one of the suffering men is looking in the direction to which the priest is pointing. Goya has drawn the top frame close to this bloody scene on earth, making the viewer wonder whether this way leads anywhere. This reading is supported by art historian Richard Muther's interpretation of many of Goya's engravings:

Goya preached Nihilism in the home of belief, he denied everything, believed nothing, doubted of everything, even of that peace and liberty that he hoped to be at hand. That old Spanish art of religion and dogma was changed under his hands to an art of negation and sarcasm. (66)

Goya doesn't make the viewer feel that the world is inherently a safe place; "the world is a masquerade," he says: "Face, dress and voice, all are false. All wish to appear what they are not, all deceive and nobody knows anybody" (Gassier et al. 131). For Goya, it is only through the



negation of ideology, politics and religion that one can, in the light of human suffering, truly see the real face of war. The ideas of the Enlightenment were proved wrong by war, as his plate 69 “Nada” suggests, as a skeleton rises from his grave to inscribe the single word, “Nothing”.<sup>47</sup>



Figure 7. Francisco Goya. “What Courage”, Plate 7.

<sup>47</sup> The original title says, “Nothing! That’s what it says.” ... the academy in Spain later decided that this was a very atheistic pessimism, and they softened the title to say “The Event Will Tell” (Gassier et al. 220).



Figure 8. Francisco Goya. "The Way is Hard", Plate 14.

The Iranian revolutionaries saw the world very differently from Goya, even though his art reflected on the resistance of his people against the invasion of Napoleon's army. The work of these visual artists, how they expressed their concerns, was closely tied to the political conditions of the time. Before and for the first few years after the revolution, Iranian subjects were depicted as fed up by the social, economic, and political conditions under the Pahlavi dynasty: they screamed out their pain, their eyes and mouths were wide open, they appeared like skeletons dying a difficult and infuriating death.<sup>48</sup> After the victory of revolution, those same

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<sup>48</sup> See for example Siroos Moghaddam's *Tyranny* (1978), *From Birth to Death* (1978) and many of Nosratollah Moslemian's paintings such as *Immigration* (1975), *Shadow in Blood* (1977) and *Strike of Oil Workers* (1978).

agitated, screaming people, now humble and spiritual, were depicted as subjects who would give their lives to defend their motherland. Hossein Khosrojerdi, another iconic figure who had been present in the circle of artists since the early stages of the Islamic Revolution, painted *Scream* in 1979 to resemble the *The Scream* (1893) of Norwegian Expressionist artist Edvard Munch. The screaming subjects, unrecognizable as human and resembling aliens, are shown in an agitated state, ripping their clothes off with mouths open as wide as possible, their furious eyes directly piercing the viewer's expectations. Their protest and opposition to the pre-Revolution authorities is emphasized by blending the space with similar colors to give depth to the angst of screaming citizens. However, after the victory of the Revolution and during the war Khosrojerdi represented Iranian fighters as dignified revolutionary preachers of resistance and sacrifice. In *Light of History* (1984) (شمع تاریخ) a stereotypical image of a martyr faces the sky, kneeling down before falling to his death. A light shines like a sun from the tip of his weapon, representing the redemptive and eye-opening nature of (his) death in war. The two iconic colors of green and red turn the scene into a historic and religious event. The combination of his green headband, a reminder of the historical 7<sup>th</sup> century symbol of Karbala martyrs, and the red of the soldier's blood that saturates the headband and turns it yellow is an allusion to the blood of Hossein and his fellow martyrs. The green band is also seen around the sphere of the earth, not only to personify earth but to make it a sympathizing witness to the soldier's sacrificial and heroic death. Death in war here is equivalent to spiritual ecstasy and a moment of redemption.





Figure 9. Hossein Khosrowjerdi. Scream, 1979.

It has been observed that in the context of war-time fever, the body becomes a political model that gives society an example of courage, heroism, and otherworldliness and demonizes the unseen and excluded enemy. As the sociologist of war Kevin McSorley states: “The reality of war is not just politics by any other means but politics incarnate, politics written on and experienced through the thinking, feeling bodies of men and women. From steeled combatants to abject victims, war occupies innumerable bodies in a multitude of ways, profoundly shaping lives and ways of being human” (1). In Khosrojerdi’s painting, there is no sign of pain and suffering in the face of the dying soldier, his eyes are closed, and when he finally falls to his death his face is turned away from the viewer. Like the averted faces of Chalipa’s subjects, the soldier is depicted as free from the material world of the viewer, imposing a specific meaning on death and forcing a one-dimensional interpretation of traumatic history. Otto Dix’s *Dying Soldier*

(1924) stands in heightened contrast to the symbolic death of the Iranian soldier in the *Light of History*. The Western/European victims of violence die a different death than those who resist an imposed war. The anti-imperialist death of a fighter has other meanings beyond the facade of destruction and decomposition.



Figure 10. Hossein Khosrowjerdi. *Light of History*. 1984.





Figure 11. Bombing of Residential Areas, 1986.

The destruction in Mostafa Goodarzi's *Bombing of Residential Areas* (1986) (Figure 11) is a site of sublime beauty. The mother is standing tall over the body of her child, the woman's body is intact, her attire reminiscent of virtuous modesty. Her posture and expression are that of questioning and blaming those who caused the despair, but her gesture is dignified, silent, and passive. The child is covered with a clean white sheet that is partly stained with blood, where the body has minor bleeding underneath. The child doesn't look like a corpse. Instead, it seems that he's been peacefully put to sleep in the midst of the debris. Almost cartoonish, a flower pot is broken near the child's head, with its flowers still radiating fresh pink color even though a

missile has just destroyed the house. The landscape is painted with dark grayish colors, blended in with the woman's attire to echo the destruction, yet the position of the woman and child create a calming effect. In contrast to Picasso's *Guernica*, Goya's *Disaster* series, and Dix's *Der Krieg* (The War), in another of Goodarzi's scenes of rubble entitled *Bombardment*, a door painted red is standing upright, foreshadowing the deadly scene behind the door. But there is no corpse, no sign of a single dead, or wounded body. The reference to death is obliquely made, but even that is invalidated by the white dove peacefully positioned on top of the door. Unlike Picasso's fallen bird, this dove is shining with a glimmering spiritual light. In the lower section of the frame, the destruction is visible only through solid dark colors, while the light at the top section suggests the crack of dawn as if the sun will rise and morning is in the horizon. The art of war, like its literature, resolves itself, as Dominick LaCapra would say, into a *redemptive and fetishistic* narrative, one that excludes or marginalizes trauma through a teleological story.

### **Revolutionary Art, Anti-Imperialism and Nationalism**

At the time of the Iran-Iraq war, the revolutionary artists discussed above stood in firm opposition to Western domination in all its forms, whether in its militaristic support of the Iraqi regime in order to defeat the newly established Islamic Republic or in the Western tradition's representation of the individual human subject in modern art. For the revolutionary Iranian nation that has based its foundation on a rhetoric of independence from imperial powers, the "I" of the individual always melts into the "we" of a nation, drawing influence from Frantz Fanon, who was himself influenced by Aimé Césaire, a leading intellectual of the anti-colonial movement. Both Césaire and Fanon put forward the idea of a national literature and a national culture, recognizing the significance of cultural nationalism leading to national consciousness. Through Dr. Ali Shariati's translating, teaching, and preaching to the masses in Iran, Fanonian

theories of self-creation and national liberation helped shape the Iranian revolution, especially the Fanonian idea of an anti-colonial self-creation of a “new man”. However, his model of a “new man” in the process of self-creation was distinct from Fanon, who rejected religion as a basis for “anticolonial selfhood.” In contrast, Shariati, who has been named “the Fanon of the Islamic Revolution” (Abrahamian, qtd. in Arash 86), emphasized a return to a religious history of Shiism as the most effective anti-imperialist endeavor, one which would finally lead to the victory of Islamic Revolution. “The mobilization of the masses,” asserts Fanon, “when it arises out of the war of liberation, introduces into each man's consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and of a collective history” (47). Shariati instead insisted on blending the religious form of collective history into the consciousness of the masses. He makes Hossein an exemplar and his Shahādat or martyrdom a way of life that a Muslim society should follow in its anticolonial or anti-Imperial reconstruction of the self.

However, Fanon also predicted that the idea of a “national literature” and “national culture” might result in xenophobia and intolerance. For him a national culture had a limited value. Just as it could help define a native culture against the crushing assault of the colonizer, it could also return a country to its pre-colonial past through the adoption of a pre-colonial culture that would not guarantee any benefit to the working classes and the oppressed. Although he was an advocate for a national culture, Fanon believed that for it to be effective, the national culture had to account for the economic conditions of the working classes. Fanon moved away from an entirely representational and cultural view of national identity towards a more Marxist materialist-economic one. He incisively noted that culture is not stable and must be dynamic and open to change and must be critically evaluated, so as to bring in appropriate changes rather than stay fixed in its older forms. For Fanon there is a parallel between the colonial masters and the



elite of the postcolonial nations, wherein the elites inhabit the positions of power once occupied by their white masters while the corruption and oppression of the working classes persists at the hands of fellow natives (Nayar 158-59). In Iran since the 1970s, the post-war cultural and artistic production has remained fixed on a religious revolutionary vision and a hegemonic national literature and culture that insures a collective identity, while neglecting the needs of the working class and victims of war who continue to remain unintegrated into the means of social, political, and cultural production. The voice of the victim is the voice of weakness, and weakness challenges the status quo.

In this social transition, the paintings of pre-revolution artists like Khosrojerdi's *Scream*, works that are explicitly expressive of social injustice and the economic crisis of the working class, have effectively been censored and replaced in the public by the post-revolutionary paintings of war and sacrificial death of a religious nature. Rather than calling attention to the disappearance in the "committed" art of the revolution of any depiction of the oppressed class of pre-revolution society who gave rise to the uprising and helped bring about the victory of the revolution, artists like Morteza Goodarzi Dibaj, who collected the arts and paintings of the revolution in two volumes entitled, *Committed Social and Religious Art in Iran* (2009), lament the visual artists' loss of that revolutionary and religious fever in favor of a material, earthly, and superficial life. Expecting the contemporary visual artist still to paint revolutionary and religious committed art, he believes that "Only when, thought, piety, and events of spiritual value return, based on the spiritual level and competence of the artists, we will have the same art of revolution" (Goodarzi 172). What Goodarzi fails to notice in this problematic statement is that, just as Iranian society expressed its values during the revolution and the war, it should now begin to articulate what it, like every society, goes through after such times of crisis. Instead,

preserving the façade of religious national identity has created a void in the voices, not of those who died but of those who continue to suffer, having survived that death. It is they who want to break free from the conservative and conformist adherence to national unity and spiritual values and to demand that their trauma and suffering be recognized in its full material reality.

### **Art of Resistance in a Globalized World**

An artist of Palestinian descent, John Halaka, has compiled a series of works as an ethical and moral response to human suffering and as a form of resistance to the complete erasure of a nation. He views his approach to the arts as the only solution for ending violence and preserving the memories of the genocidal past of the Palestinians. Halaka imaginatively, tirelessly, and optimistically dreams of initiating “a dialogue with the viewer that could hopefully instigate transformation, one person at a time” (*Artist Statement*). He presents the trauma of displacement, occupation, and also the culture of resistance, not by advocating for a revolutionary armed struggle against the perpetrator, or displaying the heroic martyrdom of the freedom fighter, or illustrating the destroyed cultural icons and symbols of Palestinian nationality, like other artists of resistance such as Ismail Shammout and Silman Mansour.<sup>49</sup> Rather, it is his belief in the universality of compassion, empathy, and respect for the dignity of all human beings that informs his artwork. For example, his body of work titled “Remember to Forget” (1993-1995) is a meditation on the sociology of martyrdom in which the martyrs he depicts are all mutilated and stripped of their cultural identity, contradicting the spiritually uplifting characterization of

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<sup>49</sup> For a comprehensive and in-depth study and analysis of Palestinian art, from its roots in folk art and traditional Christian and Islamic painting to the nationalistic themes and diverse media used today, see Gannit Ankori's *Palestinian Art*. London, Reaktion, 2006.

martyrs. He asserts that he wants “to raise questions in the viewer’s mind about his/her psychological and political relationship to the images of martyrs glorified in public monuments,” and to reflect on “the benign acceptance of a mythology of martyrdom, created through the institutional promotion of personal sacrifice and collective suffering.” Halaka addresses occupation and resistance by highlighting, albeit with brush-and ink, the unspeakable emotional and psychological pain of ordinary human beings who have been victims of the traumas of expulsion and cultural extermination. For him, war, occupation, and displacement are not primarily political battles involving “good” and “evil” in which the only “good” people are those who are celebrated in the media for their heroic death on the battlefield. For Halaka, every individual scream of pain and cry of suffering that comes as a consequence of war should be remembered.

In his new series of drawings titled “Ghosts of Presence/Bodies of Absence,” Halaka combines personal images and narratives of Palestinian refugees with the ghostly, haunting, and perpetual presence of traumatic but repressed memories resulting from a denied and destroyed homeland.<sup>50</sup> By merging the portraits of Palestinian refugees and destroyed Palestinian villages, the viewer is confronted with a powerful representation of the psychological and physical damages caused by the ongoing colonial erasure of Palestinian history and culture. Halaka’s images address the survivors’ enduring effort to cope with and to bear witness to the effects of tragedies that multiple generations of Palestinians have and continue to experience. Themes such as the loss of home and homeland through violent expulsion, the creative struggle and hope for return, and the active remembrance of a destroyed and denied homeland and culture are all

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<sup>50</sup> The narrative portraits of refugees can be seen in Halaka’s recent body of work, titled “Portraits of Denial and Desire,” created between 2012-2016; while images of destroyed and denied Palestinian landscape can be seen in his series “Landscape of Desire”, created between 2009-2013.

significant preoccupations for the Palestinian survivors and consequently for the artist. The question of traumatic memory and belonging is a recurrent theme for refugees and diasporic minorities who are dispersed and marginalized; both are central and re-occurring motifs in Halaka's work, where they are employed as tools of cultural survival and personal resistance. Halaka's artwork directly suggests that survival and resistance are a unified undertaking that actively challenges the physical and cultural erasure of indigenous cultures by colonial powers.

Recurrence, repetition, and reliving of the past are at the heart of traumatic experience and they are major features of post-traumatic culture. A traumatic encounter is defined as an experience that is too unexpected to be fully known and assimilated at the time it occurs, but that imposes itself later on repeatedly in the nightmares, flashbacks, and actions of survivors; a haunting return that demands understanding and witness (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4). In many of the drawings in "Ghosts of Presence/Bodies of Absence," the images of place are constructed out of the repetition of a single, rubber-stamped word like "survivors", "forgotten", "Resistance", "Return", "Freedom", "Desire" and "Memory". Violence creates a psychic crypt, a burial place inside the self for a loved object. This crypt created by the traumatic experience contains secrets and silences. Cryptonyms, or words with disguised meanings, create a pathway to this crypt and become "an attempt at exorcism, placing the effects of the phantom in social relation" (Schwab 95-121). In Halaka's innovative representation of traumatic memory, the viewer is confronted with the obsessive remembrance of the destruction of place, loss, longing for return, and a stubborn persistence in bearing witness to some ignored and forgotten wound that nevertheless is still active and open for many Palestinians. For Palestinians, as Halaka states, "memory is the engine of their return. Memory allows the Palestinians to envision and to seek

the denied security of their homeland; it enables them to creatively design the re-construction of their shattered society” (*Artist Statement*).

In each and every image of destruction and ruin in Halaka’s drawings, blended in the rubble there is a shadowy reflection of a face or a pair of eyes of a real victim. The combination of this human reality hovering over the fading memory of destruction allows for a dual interpretation of the image. In each and every destroyed home there are ghosts of lost human souls that are eternally present. Their eternal psychological presence counterbalances the political absence created by the barbaric and ongoing destruction of an entire people’s history. The psychological, political, and physical experiences of presence and absence that are forever engraved in the memories of Palestinian survivors pervade Halaka’s drawings. The faded imagery of traumatic history layered in Halaka’s drawings dissolve the representational character of the images almost to the point of abstraction, while the obsessive repetition of single words that shape the imagery, confirms the fact that what cannot be easily put into words registers in memory as an image. This artistic representation of trauma in “Ghosts of Presence/Bodies of Absence” suggests that despite the constant attempt at the ethnic and cultural cleansing of the Palestinian people and the consequent denial and oppression of their tragedies, the traumatic memories of destruction and oppression are not destructible; in fact, they persistently repeat themselves in their resistance to being forgotten and suppressed. The success of Halaka’s vision in this series is his proximity to the crypt of the refugees’ psychological existence. Through the shape of holes, gaps, openings, windows, and doors in the midst of rubble, Halaka creates a pathway to the abyss of traumatic memories. The construction of these gaps and openings in the drawings, without being attached or alluding to a solid and recognizable structure, represents both the impossibility of adequately representing the traumatic experience and the resistance of

the traumatized psyche to closure. They display the shapeless and phantom nature of pain and suffering and the desire and hope for justice and freedom.

In working toward addressing a universalized humanity that is inclusive of all victims of political persecution and genocide, Halaka strips the figures and the architectural structures in his drawings from any one cultural identity. He does this in order to “underscore the parallel tragedies of displacement between the Palestinians and other persecuted people”. This artistic choice can be identified as a move toward presenting a humanized morality, placing the wounded body and psyche in a dialogical relationship with the rest of the world in order to bear witness to other violent histories and bring about a sympathetic relation to other marginal and affected groups. It supports the view that resistance to a colonial and imperial politics of division (of zones and peoples) that follows a “principle of reciprocal exclusivity” (Fanon 37) cannot be done through a politics of separation and isolation.



Figure 12. John Halaka. Ghosts of Presence/Bodies of Absence #18 - Desire (2016).  
Ink and rubber-stamped words on photograph printed on drawing paper.



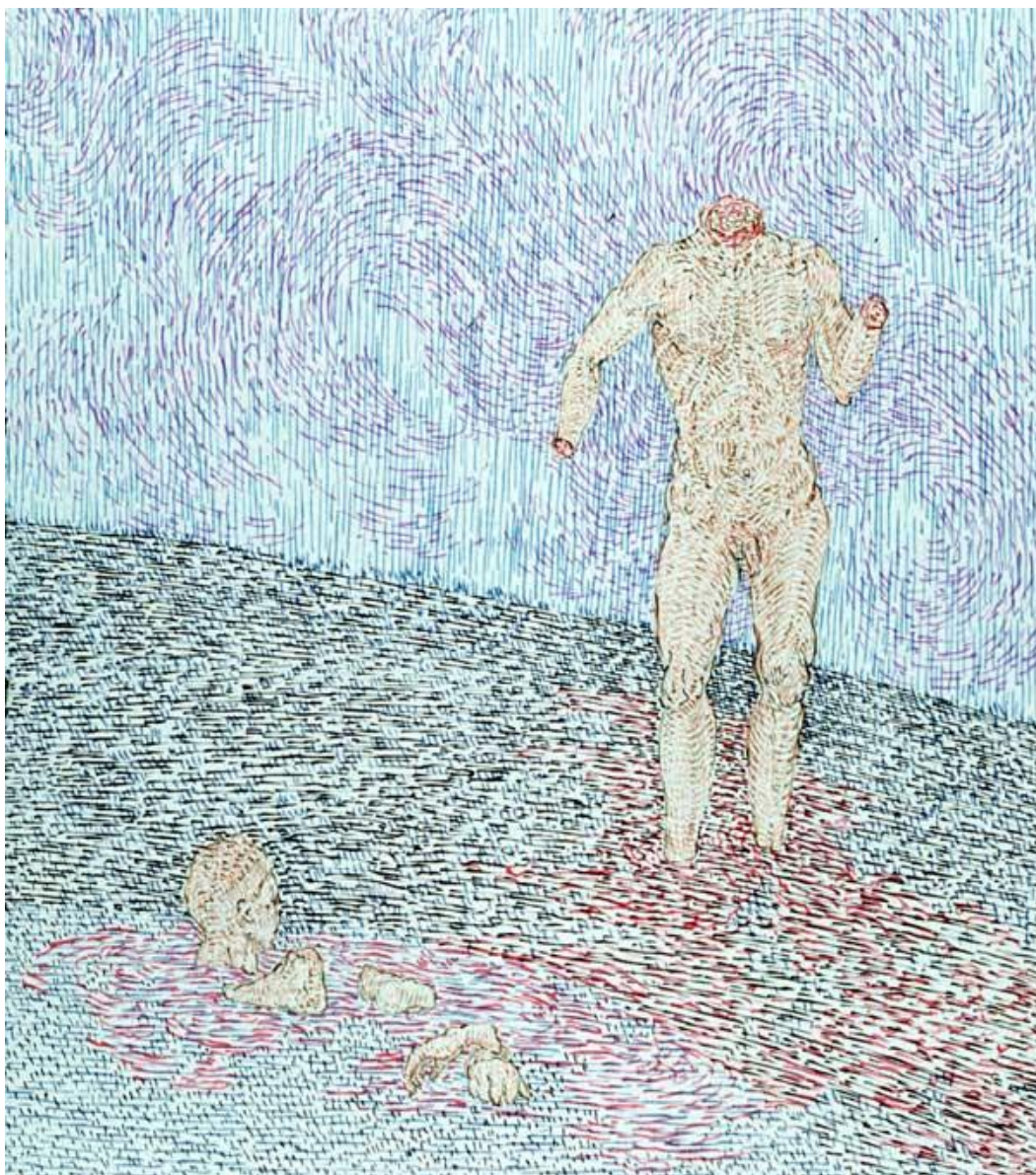


Figure 13. John Halaka. If Headless Figures Could Talk, Would They Speak of Their Sacrifice #3 (1993).

### **Representing the Post-traumatic Life of Iran-Iraq War in Film and Photography**



Perhaps the most daring visual representation of post-traumatic experience of Iran's war to date, with detailed focus on a ravaged psyche of a soldier, is the film *Marriage of the Blessed* by Mohsen Makhmalbaf (Arousi-ye Khouban, 1989), one of the first cinematic representations to critically analyze the impact of revolution and war on the individual and society. No visual or literary production of the consequences of war has yet so effectively portrayed post-traumatic stress disorder as the work of the director, writer and producer Mohsen Makhmalbaf.<sup>51</sup> Formerly a radical revolutionary opposed to the regime of Mohammad Rezā Shāh Pahlavī, Makhmalbaf externalizes, publicizes, and historicizes the suffering of his film's marginalized characters. In opposition to the Islamic Republic's tendency to suppress the non-conformist portrayals of the physical and psychological reality of suffering, Makhmalbaf depicts the dismantling, decomposition and what Elaine Scarry calls the "unmaking" of a soldier in the context of the Iran-Iraq War. In this important mid-career political film, the director's primary protagonist, Haji, is a photojournalist hospitalized for shell shock after covering the war. The film follows Haji's constant pathologizing, medicalization, and his difficult reintegration into society after his release from the hospital. The director uses striking montages of black and white shots, flash-bulb lighting, and intrusive close-ups to suggest the ways in which bodies are deployed, transformed, and recycled to serve the ideological purposes of the state. Through still photographs, film extracts, graffiti, and billboard art, Makhmalbaf begins the narrative with a long traveling shot through hospital hallways, ending in a mental quarter where Haji and other veterans suffer from various forms of mania. (Figure 14)

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<sup>51</sup> For more on the evolution of Makhmalbaf and his films from a radical pro-revolution artist to an experimental relativist filmmaker see Eric Egan's *The Films of Makhmalbaf*. Washington, D.C., Mage Publisher, 2005. Also, Dabashi, Hamid. *Makhmalbaf at Large: The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker*. London, I.B. Tauris, 2008.



Figure 14. Mahmoud Bigham as Haji in Mohsen Makhmal Marriage of the Blessed 1988. (Photograph: Bahram Jalali; courtesy of Makhmalbaf Film House).

In the opening shot, the camera is situated behind a hospital tray and the zoom is primarily focused on medical instruments. After moving in gloomy tight hallways, the cart enters the room full of veterans moving about like lunatics. The specific language is noticeable in the veterans' self-addressed monologues as each performs a theatrical re-enactment of the

battlefield experience. “Holy martyrs!” cries out one protagonist in his flashback, a battlefield explosion, “We are in a critical situation, send angels.” shouts another, with a tin pot on his head. This opening sequence, in its visual, historical, and political intensity, juxtaposes the theme of the “holiness” of war in its linguistic specificity with the portrayal of male protagonists who, whether their suffering is ideological, physical or psychological, are all imprisoned and locked in a mental hospital. As a physician starts to draw blood from Haji’s hand, his traumatic memories of the battlefield are visualized in flashback. As Haji falls down from the shock of an explosion, he embraces a hand touching his face. A reframing of the shot shows the hand has been cut off from the body, while another reframing reveals blood flowing from still another soldier’s shoulder. (Figure 15) An image, a non-narrative imprint of the event, recorded in the memory of its survivor, is transmitted and communicated to the viewer. The flashback to this moment of extremity unveils the protagonist’s intrusion of recurring and disturbing return to the traumatic scene and his hyper-vigilance in reaction to the most benign sounds and sights and constant reliving of the experience in present.

Referencing a verse in the Quran: *الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمْ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ* , “who when misfortune falls upon them say: surely we are Allah’s and to him do we return,” such spiritual and religious thought considers the earthly world to be the lowest form of all, temporal and short-lived, in contrast to the glory of life after death, believing that “martyrdom for the cause of God was the ultimate perfection a human being could attain” (Mitchell 59). The physical and material reality of life and the human body are, in this conception, replaced by the promise of paradise, where participation in war is idealized as a religious form of “jihad”, a gate to eternal happiness. Makhmalbaf subverts this ideology, foregrounding the very materiality of suffering by those who survive and continue their complicated lives after the war. The

misfortunes are often tragic, and the hellish madhouse far from perfection. It is in the deconstruction of both the material and immaterial world of the survivor that Makhmalbaf seeks to represent the post-traumatic condition of those who survive to live the historical trauma. As Elaine Scarry argues,

...the incontestable reality of the body—the body in pain, the body maimed, the body dead and hard to dispose of—is separated from its source and conferred on an ideology or issue or instance of political authority...The winning issue or ideology achieves for a time the force and status of material “fact” by the sheer material weight of the multitudes of damaged and opened human bodies. (62)

The stability of any political state, a very material reality, is founded on the material base of the human body, yet the wound, the crisis of suffering itself, becomes a symbol of non-material abstraction. Julia Kristeva similarly emphasizes the significance of the body, proposing that it is through the body that transcendence is possible – where transcendence is understood as a horizon of possibility for futurity, not as a flight into a metaphysical and disembodied beyond. The subjects of Sacred Defense art – their body and its drives – are faced with a crisis of non-representation (Söderbäck 320). *Marriage of the Blessed* depicts the importance of the body within which the psychological and physical consequences of war are entangled and become highly political. Black and white shots of poverty and crime in dark corners of the city through the lens of this shell-shocked journalist resembles Goya and Dix’s stylistic innovations of depicting brutal realities. The aesthetization of the post-war condition of a wounded subject in symbolic form takes advantage of the reality of the suffering subject.

In the film's climactic scene, set at Haji’s wedding, he photographs the guests. The images he sees through the lens of his camera underscore the contradiction between the idealized promises of the redistribution of wealth according to the revolutionary rhetoric and the material

realities of the new wealthy class, including his father-in-law. A subsequent shot fixes Haji's gaze on two of his comrades. He sees their young, glowing, cheerful, and vigorous faces before the war through the camera and their disfigured broken bodies after the war. Flashbacks of colorful pre-war imagery quickly shift with the sound of the shutter to a black and white post-war traumatized reality. In this shot his gaze on the young veterans is contemplative and full of bewilderment and agony. His empathy is so complete that he must be taken away to avert his eyes from the disfigured and transformed veterans.





Figure 15. Mahmoud Bigham as Haji in Mohsen Makhmal Marrigae of the Blessed 1988.

Just as Fanon gradually moved away from an entirely socio-cultural view of national identity and suggested a more materialist-economic and dynamic approach, for post-revolutionary post-war artists like Makhmalbaf, the economic degradation of society after the war became a vehicle in which the message of traumatic survival could be delivered. It was only through the realization of the material reality of the body and its suffering and only through the juxtaposition of the extreme and the everyday life of a survivor that the complexity of traumatic experience could be delivered. According to Rothberg, traumatic realism sheds light only on the historical “event” without being explicitly descriptive in detailed mimetic form. At the same time, however, it does attempt to “program and transform its readers so that they are forced to acknowledge their relationship to post-traumatic culture” (Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* 103). For Makhmalbaf, the fictional structure and representation of the Iran-Iraq war through abstract religious ideologies did not do sufficient justice to the harsh mental and physical transformation of the soldiers in peace time and the postwar structure of society. For this reason, when Haji

ultimately breaks free from the hospital, he wanders the streets of Tehran to become the subject of a different artist's lens, in this case, of the photographer's gaze.

Despite the opposition of postcolonial theory to the Western conception of the individuality of the subject and the psychologization of trauma,<sup>52</sup> as discussed in the first chapter through the works of Irene Visser and Stef Craps, modern postcolonial and anti-imperial artists have become more concerned with the significance of the body, and of pain and suffering on an individual level. This is done not to eliminate the history of imperial and colonial influence on traumatic and post-traumatic cultures, or to blindly follow Western conceptions of trauma, or to generalize societal, political, and cultural complexities as a single entity, but to emphasize the importance of creating a space of dialogue between the individual and the collective voice to avoid sacrificing the singularity and importance of the individual's pain and suffering. The postcolonial resistance to a Western ideology of the individual need not eliminate the reality of the suffering body and the psyche from the field of artistic representations and replace it with images of symbolic religious regeneration and the formation of a static identity unaffected by the progression of time post-war. An art of resistance should accommodate alternative forms and modes of representation that, without over-generalizing, represent the continuation of the life of the living survivors with all its complexities once the war is over.

Ebrahim Hatami Kia is another prolific film director who has turned a critical gaze on the post-traumatic consequences of war for its victims, their positions in a postwar society, and their relation to societies who are fast forgetting these heroes. *From Karkhe to Rihne* (1993) is one of Hatami Kia's films which remains the most affectionate, detailed, and revolutionary

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<sup>52</sup> See Craps, Stef, and Gert Buelens. "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 40, no. 1–2, Mar. 2008, p. 1. Also, Visser, Irene. "Decolonizing Trauma Theory; Retrospect and Prospects." *Humanities*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2015, pp. 250–265.

representation of the postwar and post-traumatic dilemma of veterans of war; it is also Hatamikia's most retrospective examination of his own role as a conformist who has spent much of his own life as a soldier.<sup>53</sup> In *From Karkhe to Rihne* the director breaks with conventional assumptions about the sacred defense as a homogenous Iranian narrative of holy war beyond its restricted borders. His severely wounded veterans of war receive treatment and many die as a result of the fatal damage done to their bodies in foreign countries, in this case, Germany. The protagonist, Said, is blinded in the war, and later while being treated to regain his sight, is diagnosed with leukemia as a result of exposure to chemicals during the war. The irony of this transnational setting of the plot lies in the demand for a transnational dialogue with Western and European allies who actively participate in the victimization of hundreds of thousands of human beings by selling arms and chemical weapons to the oppressive Iraqi regime. Working through the problem of imperial technological capabilities that create weapons of mass destruction and then provide the antidote to its venom, Hatami Kia brings into frame the excluded face of the West from the Sacred Defense genre and puts it side by side with the victims. The idealist Said converses with his severely wounded comrade, Kazem, who wants to seek asylum in Germany, is bitterly critical of the war, and experiences an existential crisis questioning God for the miseries he suffers. The director departs from the clichés of war depicting opposing forces, including East and West, and questions the early revolutionary slogans of 'No East, No West, only the Islamic Republic'. Geographic borders disappear to enlist a mutual conversation between East and West, perpetrator and the victim. Hatami Kia, a devoted revolutionary, chooses to follow the lives of the warriors after the war, depicting the problems, challenges, and

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<sup>53</sup> For a comprehensive study of the social history of Iranian cinema from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first see Naficy. Hamid. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Vols 1-4* published by Durham, Duke UP (2011-2012).



contradictions they face in the post-war era while at the same time questioning their motives for taking part and interrogating the betrayed ideals and promises of the revolution (Esfandiary 152-162). Dialogue and debate between opposing views is the focal feature of Hatami Kia's later films as well. As opposed to Naser Palangi's *Light of History*, in which the soldier's death is *extraterrestrial*, as if his death stands apart from any other, Hatami Kia's veterans, disillusioned by their former ideals, die on the same *earth* that belongs to all humans regardless of race, geographic origin, or religion. They die not a peaceful, painless, glorious death but are instead tortured by a gradual deteriorating demise in a foreign soil, where a wounded Muslim soldier seeks refuge in a Christian church, crumbling and weeping as he confronts the reality of his damaged and dying body. This act of breaking down the boundaries of the East/West dichotomy is a step toward dialogue; he places the emphasis on the importance of the body in pain without sacrificing the particular history and trauma of this particular war.<sup>54</sup>

"The appearance...of a body", Caruth writes, "though mutilated", is "the paradoxical evocation of a referential reality neither fictionalized by direct reference nor formalized into a theoretical abstraction" (*Unclaimed Experience* 92). What Caruth emphasizes here is the state between a "phenomenal" and "conceptual" world, between "dying" and "living," which "resists being generalized into a conceptual or figural law" (*Unclaimed Experience* 93). She is highlighting in her statements the "double wounding" of trauma survivors, as she refers to it, the difficulty of defining and expressing pain in a state in which survivors struggle between an understanding of the event that has befallen them and the suffering of the moment. The

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<sup>54</sup> While there has been extensive research and scholarly work on post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, only a handful of works has been published on Iranian war cinema or the Cinema of Sacred Defense. See Esfandiary, Shahab. *Iranian Cinema and Globalization: National, Transnational and Islamic Dimensions*, 2012. See also Pedram Khosronejad's *War in Iranian Cinema: Religion, Martyrdom and National Identity*. Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2012.

vulnerable body, the body in pain, the body suffering wipes out assumed differences based on social, cultural, political, and geographical specificities and expresses only a cry for recognition. Survivors bear witness to traumatic events by embodying suffering, yet representing it as a singular and individual experience that is hard to theorize and generalize and that resists the imposition of any specific meaning. The vulnerable body in pain dismantles all meaning. In the experience of suffering, claims Harold Schweizer, the “ideology of objectivity, the claims of reason and knowledge, are called into question”; “Philosophical distinctions of body and spirit, sensation and intellect, the universal and particular, the physical and metaphysical, no longer apply. The very law of identity is in crisis” (2). Both Makhmalbaf and Hatami Kia’s characters face this question of identity in a complex world in which they are no longer the lights of history or the continuation of Shiite revolutionary identity; instead, they are merely dehumanized by pain and swallowed up by the forgetfulness of a society in which they were once a source of light.

The artists, writers, and intellectuals of the post-war period in Iran have yet to invent ways of representing the continuous struggle with life of the marginal survivors. For that to happen they must retreat from the isolation of their imaginations and listen to the voices of actual survivors. Those visual artists who identify their art with an art of resistance must adopt a form and technique that includes the living survivors in their representation. Above all, artists and intellectuals must become immune to the institutional codification of historical events and the forms of remembrances displayed in public monuments.

### **Post-traumatic Consequences of War in Photography**

While the medium of painting in the post-war era in Iran has retained its focus on the state sponsored symbolic representation of a nationalist, anti-colonial/anti-imperial project,

Mehdi Monem's (1951- ) realist photography graphically illustrates what it means to be blown up in fragments and survive only to live a life in pain.<sup>55</sup> As he states, "The war was an unpleasant event in which some people were killed and some lost. Me and the civilian victims of war are in the group of the losers." Monem's photographs are representative of what it means to lose and how to live with the consequences of this loss in an apolitical environment that propagates the notion of gain and redemption in the hereafter. His images are devoid of any metaphysical, religious, or spiritual meaning. Prosthesis hands and legs, oxygen tanks, blinded eyes, and amputated hands and legs are the objects of his photography. Like Otto Dix's artistic vision, for Monem too the reality of traumatic life becomes communicable only through the objects and shapes of the dismembered and disfigured bodies and the gaze of its subjects. His photographs resist any romantic idealism about survival, "war wounds grow old, but they do not heal." He suggests that, "in time the wounded learn to endure the memory and live with their pain. But the injustice of war does not end there. War banishes its victims to oblivion only to catch its breath. It can then move on unheeded to reduce other peoples and communities to cinder" (Monem 1). Monem uses his photography to resist such oblivion and forgetfulness, "to register and remind, to break the silence that feeds war," and to close the "road to our purposeful neglect" (1). He views the consequences of war as unhealable, as creating a perpetual traumatic memory as well as a physical reality. He does this not only through his depiction of the first generation's direct experience of the war, but also of the second generation's connection to the trauma of their parents that now belongs to them.

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<sup>55</sup> War photography has been the dominant form of documentation and representation of war in Iran, mostly sponsored by ideological and political agenda of the state. For more on war photography see Saramifar, Younes. "Framing the War in the Post War Era: Exploring the Counter-Narratives in Frames of an Iranian War Photographer Thirty Years after the Ceasefire with Iraq." *Media, War & Conflict*, vol. 12, no. 4, Dec. 2019, pp. 392–410.

In the section titled “Civilian Victims of Chemical Weapons” in *Victims of War* (2009), an intense close up of a gaze of a young boy hits the eye. The bright eye is the central focus of the frame and is directly looking into the camera and the eyes of the viewers.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, without taking the whole central space, with a slightly tilted face, the piercing gaze directs us to what is blurred in his background. The blurred image is not so hazy that it is made unreal; there is still a recognizable relation to the real object and subject in the background. A man wears a mask that, for the knowledgeable viewer, is an object that directly associates the man with the victims of chemical warfare. In this very immersed close-up of an intense stare, the blurred man in the mask space also loses depth and everything becomes condensed in a pair of eyes. There is nothing but an eye staring at us. No mouth or lips of the subjects are shown from the two faces, one masked and the other out of the frame. No words are or can be spoken. Blurring the background gives it an abstract quality which synthesizes the modern and the traditional form of representation. The modern subject in pain is a marginalized body blurred into oblivion. The photograph allows for the formation of three possible stories at the same time; that of the first generation of victims, the second generation of offspring, and the viewer.

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<sup>56</sup> For more on chemical warfare see Firouzkouhi, Mohammadreza, et al. “Nurses Experiences in Chemical Emergency Departments: Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988.” *INTERNATIONAL EMERGENCY NURSING*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 123–128. See also “Medical Expert Reports Use of Chemical Weapons in Iran-Iraq War.” *UN Chronicle*, vol. 22, no. 5, Jan. 1985, pp. 24–26.



Figure 16. Baneh, 2001. Photography by Medi Monem, published in *Victims of War*.

James Young has named the process of the next generation's response to the historical event as "the afterlife of memory, represented in history's after-image: the impressions retained in the mind's eye of a vivid sensation long after the original, external cause has been removed" (23). He suggests that the second generation's narrative is more about their own experience and their own trauma. Marianne Hirsch calls the second generation's response to trauma "postmemory," given that it recontextualizes the trauma of the first. There is a kind of compulsive and traumatic repetition that connects the two together that is mostly about the relationship of the children of trauma survivors to the experiences of their parent (Zelizer 218). In Monem's war photography, trauma is not only the "afterlife of memory" or "postmemory." Unlike the second and third generations of the Holocaust, who Young believes have experienced the trauma of the first generation mostly through films, photographs, histories, and novels, Monem's second-generation photographic subjects are physically attached to and perplexed and

traumatized by the first generation's tangible trauma and their everyday struggles in life. Cathy Caruth proposes that trauma is an encounter with another, an attempt of telling and listening, a listening to another's wound (*Unclaimed Experience* 8). The look in the boy's eye invites the viewer to an untold story suffocated behind the mask.

Another photograph in this section was taken in 2008, when more than three hundred chemical warfare victims were invited to a clinical recreational gathering along with their families. One victim who could not stand the heavy air of the hotel suddenly fell on the ground and was then taken out to the open air. A huge oxygen tank is seen to be attached to the victim by a plastic tube while his back is to the wall, sitting with one leg bent and the other stretched against the diagonal lines of the cemented ground. His right hand twisted to reach the left side of his head exposes his acute condition. The victim's very young daughter is looking at her father's miserable state right in front of her, both of her little hands entangled in front of her in a gesture of bafflement and helplessness. Her face is not recognizable to the viewer, due to the high position of the camera; the viewer looks at the whole scene from above, perhaps from the top floor where all the other attendees are gathered (Monem 101). The high camera angle puts the subject in an inferior position relative to the viewer's more dominant point of view. The position of the viewer looking at the victim and his daughter enhances the victim's powerless position, his fallen stature, his vulnerability, his body in pain, yet he attracts attention and curiosity. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen define this positioning of the camera as a visual form of *indirect address* which represents an *offer* in which "the viewer is an invisible onlooker and the depicted person is the *object* of the look – here those depicted either do not know that they are being looked at, [...] or act as if they do not know" (122). In this image the historical past is represented through the post-traumatic life of the survivor and the transgenerational

consequences of war through the gaze of offspring. The continuity of traumatic history, the everyday violence of the body in pain, the perpetual suffering and the detached and unseen position of the bystander, the uninvolved and distant observer are all framed in this shot. This detachment further highlights the unspeakable and incomprehensible nature of the suffering subject that cannot be breached or narrativized. All the subjects, the wounded body, the daughter, and the viewer are isolated in the intense silent entanglement of their frozen and helpless awareness of one other. This sense of detachment, the hierarchy of the gaze from above is perhaps best exemplified in the unveiling of the Iranian monumental statue of the victims of chemical weapons in the Hague. (Figure 18) Like most paintings of the Iran-Iraq war, the statue represents a symbolic death. The body of the statue seems to be gradually shredding to pieces but the deterioration of the body is represented as a tranquil flight to its freedom.<sup>57</sup> For symbolists, the goal is usually not a “complete or even accurate description of visual reality or an idea but the evocation or suggestion of the idea” (*Symbolist Movement* 7). This form of representation is deemed to be the most suitable platform in which collective anti-colonial or anti-imperial concerns can be represented. In this sense,

Collective traumas are reflections of neither individual suffering nor of actual events, but symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine them. Rather than descriptions of what is, they are arguments about what must have been and what should be. From the perspective of cultural sociology, the contrast between factual and fictional statements is not an Archimedean point. The truth of a cultural script depends not on its empirical accuracy, but on its symbolic power and enactment. Yet, while trauma process is not rational, it is intentional. It is people who make traumatic meanings, in circumstances they have not themselves created and which they do not fully comprehend. (Alexander 4)

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<sup>57</sup> “Berlin, Nov 27, IRNA – A monumental statue titled Chemical Weapons Victims, dedicated by Islamic Republic of Iran to Chemical Weapons Non-Proliferation Organization was unveiled at CWNPO Headquarters in Hague, Netherlands, Monday.” “The monument was created by Mr Taher Sheykh-ol-Hokamii, an instructor at the University of Tehran’s faculty of fine arts whose works have been exhibited in 17 countries. The monument represents a victim gradually losing his/her life from the effects of chemical weapons whose body is simultaneously converted into peace doves” (OPCW News, web).

The symbol of the chemical victim's body indirectly references the gradual death of the subject, but it nevertheless beatifies and anesthetizes a painful and excruciating experience that is not communicable in simple terms. The statue renders this individual experience of trauma even further invisible and imposes a fictional narrative that constructs a reality detached from empirical truth. Monem's photography, on the other hand, combines elements of the empirical and actual with his artistic vision which is a commentary on the mythologized version of history as presented by symbolic representation. In this strategy, the traumatic is defined as "the peculiar combination of ordinary and extreme elements" that "marks the necessity of considering how the ordinary and extraordinary could interconnect and coexist" (Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* 100).

In yet another attempt to document the reality of traumatic consequences of war, a Monem photograph draws our attention to the eyes of a young girl at the center of the camera's focus. (Figure 17) Two hands coming from behind her are closely tied around her neck. The real hand with flesh and bone is directly positioned on the chest and the other peculiar, apparently wax hand is close to the throat, touching the girl's chin. She is deeply drowned in her mother's arms, who is wearing ornate, native clothing, and she feels the touch of both a human hand of flesh and a cold, soulless artificial hand at the same time. The gaze at the camera and into the viewer's eyes suggests an ambiguous look—uncertain, painful, yet assured by a soft and concealed smile. The artificial hand is an object alluding to the victims of exploded mines and the gaze demands engagement with a prosthetic hand that seems to be pressing on and choking the subject's throat.

With regard to the viewer-text relationship, Kress and van Leeuwen make a basic distinction between an "offer" and a "demand": "a gaze of *direct address* [represents] a *demand* for the viewer (as the *object* of the look) to enter into a parasocial relationship with the



depicted person” (122ff). The demand for this direct gaze from an audience is a cry for recognition of the vulnerable groups. In the photograph, the girl, a member of the second generation, represents the continual suffering that follows surviving a traumatic event and the crisis of its aftermath. The war has been over for decades, yet the remaining landmines continue to dismantle lives. The event itself does not belong to past, it becomes a perpetual experience that produces itself anew. This is made visible through the fragmented body of the mother who has no face in this frame, yet whose presence is made vivid through her suffocating entanglement with the child. The significant historical symbols, e.g. oxygen tanks, masks, tubes, artificial body organs, however, refer to close historical past trauma, and not the seventh-century history of religious identity. Instead of referencing dead subjects as martyrs for a spiritual and redemptive closure, the subjects are living survivors who die a thousand times every day. Unlike the institutional representation of the Iran-Iraq war, which tends to revive the particular collective mythic aspect of a traumatic past in order to remember and memorialize the conflict, Momen’s traumatic realist project of remembrance insists on “confronting the individual voice in a field dominated by political decisions and administrative decrees which neutralize the concreteness of despair and death” (LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust* 213). By documenting the facts of empirical reality, his project provides an alternative point of view, one that demands departure from the kind of symbolic representations that attempt to “bring total integration” to the post-traumatic lives of those struggling to survive in postwar Iran.



Figure 17. Sar-e Pol-e Zahab, 2007. Medi Monem's photography published in Victims of War.



Figure 18. Monument to Victims of Chemical Weapons Unveiled at OPCW Headquarters in The Hague. Wednesday, 28 November 2012.

In this chapter I have argued that the body and psyche in pain resists institutionalized representations of the immaterial meaning of war and that the materiality of war's reality cannot be assimilated into an anti-imperial/Western capitalist design without ignoring or refusing the individual experience of suffering. The traumatic realist projects described above produce the events of war "as an object of knowledge," instead of isolating them into metaphysical, untouchable moments with clear-cut definitions and one-dimensional stories—of the sort that, in recent years, have neutralized and desensitized the public from their much needed response to post-traumatic suffering. The traumatic realist approach is present in the work of Iranian filmmakers and photographers who have recognized this problem and whose work allows for

other meanings to arise from the collective experience of war. Unlike these artists, whose focus on traumatic experiences is designed to provoke their audiences, Iranian painters of post-traumatic life have yet to develop ways of engaging with the viewer by turning the inward gaze of their subjects *outward* to interact and engage with the social, political, and global. What I wish to claim in this chapter is that this outward form of engagement, one that pays attention to diverse personal and individual stories of living with perpetual consequences of war, is a necessary means to counter the “deadly persistence of religious, racial, and ethnic hatred” (Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism* 272) insofar as it is able to demonstrate the shared similarities of vulnerability in victims of all wars. Incorporating the traumatic *real* back into forms of representation of war and allowing cultural practices to reflect on the everyday life of its victims effaces the hierarchies and binaries of sanctified and de-sanctified death and suffering, drawing attention to the social and economic complexities of post-traumatic crisis both nationally and on a global stage.

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## CHAPTER 2

### THE VISUAL QUALITY OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE: AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not been settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be construed as knowledge nor assimilated into full recognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.

Shoshana Felman (16)

Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality... One can't possess reality, one can possess images—one can't possess the present but one can possess the past.

Susan Sontag (163)

Traumatic memories, usually differentiated from normal everyday memories by their intensity, distressfulness, or emotional impact, it appears that may well be stored in the region of the brain that is responsible for processing emotions and sensations but not language or speech. Judith Herman's research based on clinical studies concluded that traumatic memories "are not determined like normal memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is incorporated into a continuing life story [...] "[lacking] verbal narrative and context, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (38). Bessel Van der Kolk and Rita Fisler noted that narrative memories of a traumatic event develop more slowly, with trauma victims initially struggling to put their experience into words. Cognitive neuroscientists have proposed that "narrowed attention during a traumatic event results in more detailed perceptual representations being created in the image-based memory (SAM) system compared with the verbally accessible memory (VAM) system" (see Brewin et al. 210-32).

Following the previous chapter on the afterimages of war, this chapter analyzes the narrative of Hassan Bani Ameri's *Sparrows Understand Heaven* (2006), in which traumatic



historical events of war are explicitly referenced in photographic and filmic imagery.<sup>58</sup>

Throughout this fragmented photographic narrative recounting different characters' traumatic histories, historical accuracy is highlighted through their personal explicit memories of events. Realist accounts of the violent nature of these events are narrated by means of modernist techniques to emphasize the extraordinariness<sup>59</sup> of their nature, which cannot and should not be constructed into a simple, chronological story. The author approaches the subject of Sacred Defense with an extremely confusing pastiche of the graphic memories of survivors in order to examine a number of themes: the national and personal admiration and respect for those who lost their lives in defense of their homeland; the myth of their heroism and otherworldliness; and the reality that these survivors are ordinary humans who must evolve within the unprecedented violence of war. Without denying the extraordinary valor of the commanders and fighters during the Iran-Iraq war, Bani Ameri veils the human and flawed side of mythic characters within a fragmented narrative that paints both a romanticized and a realist picture of brutal events. His surrealist ending refuses any full comprehension of the traumatic nature of the events that unfold and any claim of authority and ownership over their truth and meaning. The only true agents of meaning, his novel suggests, are those who have seen and experienced it all.

*Gungisk'ha bihist Ra mifahmand* is a fictional account of actual historical events during the war, mainly in the Kurdish region of Iran. Shortly after the start of the war, the Iraqi government started to encourage the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) to join in the war

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<sup>58</sup> With the exception of one article in Persian, there has been no critical analysis published on this novel. Most of the writings are limited to a short summary of the novel online or a brief description in categorizing the novel within the larger field of war writings. See Hanif, Mohammad. *Jang az Se Didgah* [War from Three Perspectives]. Sarir. 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Extraordinariness of events in the context of this dissertation does not mean other worldly or something of an abstract nature, but as the word itself presents itself, it is about that event that is out of the boundaries of everyday reality and normalcy of life.

effort. For its part, the KDPI hoped to create “Kurdish liberated zones” throughout Iranian Kurdistan, relying on Iraqi-supplied weapons and those captured from military repositories inside Iran. As early as late 1981, however, the war began to turn against both the KDPI and Iraq, when Iranian forces imposed grave casualties on Iraqi forces and pushed them across the border. As a result, the Iranian forces launched a sequence of devastating attacks against the KDPI, reducing them to a marginal military factor during the rest of the war (Entessar 1).

The memories of this war of betrayal and loyalty in *Sparrows* is written from the perspective of an Iranian photojournalist, Danial Delfam, framed in fragmented imagery to reconstruct the character of his best friend, half-brother, and commander Alijan, who has been shot and drowned while crossing the Arvand River during an operation. A small local hospital under siege by separatist Kurds is the focal point of the first two chapters, where Alijan and Danial, after passing through the chaotic sites of horror and destruction in the Kurdish neighborhoods, join other fighters and local Kurds, including Ali Ashraf, who later in the novel is discovered to be Danial and Alijan’s half-brother. The events of this day refer to the real historical fall of the city into the separatists’ hands and the efforts of celebrated iconic commanders such as Dr. Mostafa Chamran to lead a resistance and rescue group. Dr. Chamran manages to call the revolutionary guards and the military to the city to defeat the rebels. A helicopter carrying the wounded and dead people out (the only way out of this location, which is surrounded) crashes into a mountain, where its propellers start to chop people’s heads and bodies into pieces. Dr. Chamran later remembers this event as the most devastating and maddening of his life (interview).

The reconstruction of this specific event in history is divided into two main chapters and seven subchapters, each titled by the colors of the rainbow. What is most striking about

*Sparrows* is its quality of leaving nothing to the imagination, even if it does not include even a single photograph, painting, or graphic of any sort. To better understand and analyze this complex, colorful narrative, it is necessary to start from the initial words of the title pages. The very first words of the title page read; “Haft Awrang: *Gonjeshkhâ Behesh râ Mifahmand*, Shamâyel Gardâni bâ do Tâblo” (a literal translation would be, “*Seven Thrones: Sparrows Understand Heaven, a Canvas in Two Panels*”).<sup>60</sup> The term Haft Awrang (هفت اورنگ), meaning “Seven Thrones”) is a reference to the seven stars that form the Big Dipper (Big Bear or دب اکبر). It is also a reference to the classic work of poetry *Haft Awrang* by the Sufi and scholar Abdol al-Rahman Jami, the most notable classic Persian poet of the fifteenth century. Jami’s *Haft Awrang* is composed of seven books whose themes deal with love stories of biblical and Persian classic characters, such as Joseph and Zoleikha, Layla and Majnun, as well as didactic anecdotes. Between 1556 and 1565, the Prince of Persia<sup>61</sup> commissioned his own atelier of painters and calligraphers to compose an illustrated version of the *Haft Awrang*, a request that resulted in the production of one of the masterpieces of the Persian miniature.<sup>62</sup> The reference to this illustrated classic informs the reader of the novel’s pictorial content.

The second part of the main title of the novel, *Gonjeshkhâ Behesh râ Mifahmand* ( گنجشکها بهشت را میفهمند ) *Sparrows Understand Heaven*, is followed by the phrase “Shamâyel Gardâni bâ do Tâblo” (شمایل گردانی با دوتابلو) or Shamayel Gardani, Holding of the Icon, a form of illustrated public storytelling that started to evolve in the sixteenth century. Shamayel Gardani would exhibit pictures painted on canvas or on glass, narrating the fate of the martyrs of the

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<sup>60</sup> This novel has not been translated to any other languages. All translations of this novel are my own translation and so every reference is to the original novel.

<sup>61</sup> Sultan Ibrahim Mirza, nephew and son-in-law of Shah Tahmasp I.

<sup>62</sup> The illustrated classic is now in the Freer Gallery of Art and is known as the Freer Jami.

Battle of Karbala in 680 AD (Rubin et al. 193), an act very much resembling the performative art of Tazie, a traditional form of theater that reenacted the events of Karbala. Even before the reader begins the novel itself, they find themselves an audience to a sort of visual performance, an illustrated story, in seven parts, and in two panels, with each of these seven thrones containing an important or mythic story of historical characters like that of Jami's *Haft Awrang* or the religious and heroic icons of seventh century Karbala. The totality of this model of representation—its narration of the photographic imagery and insertion of other character's memories of events—creates a new visual narrative that combines documentary of the war with traditional illustrated storytelling.<sup>63</sup>



Figure 19. A Naghal narrating an illustrated story. <https://article.tebyan.net>.

<sup>63</sup> Coffee houses came into being during Safavid Dynasty in fifteenth Century in Iran and flourished during Qajar Dynasty around seventeenth Century. Around the time of constitutional revolution (1905-1911) this place of gathering developed to be a place of illustrated storytelling or narrative paintings for the lay people in order to learn about their history, religion, and do cultural activities as well as public awakening. The coffee house painting were mostly divided into two categories of secular and religious paintings. The non-religious paintings usually displayed epic stories of Persian legendary figures, kings, and heroes and scenes from their battle fields or stories of romance. *Shahnameh* (Epic of Kings) by Ferdowsi (940-1020 CE) the great poet of pre-Islamic era was especially the theme of many coffee house paintings. The religious themes displayed Islamic iconic figures like prophet Mohammad or his son in law Ali, the first Imam of Shia, or the legendary battle of Karbala with Hossein the third Imam and his seventy-two followers as the focal point.

Bani Ameri in *Sparrows*, possibly for the first time in the history of the Sacred Defense genre, gives life again to illustrated storytelling and coffee-house painting, this time with a new theme and a new modern tool, the battlefields of the Iran-Iraq war together with photographic imagery created by a film recording of the witnesses' memory. The narration of the story resembles two traditional narrative forms, Naqqāli (oral storytelling) and Pardeh Dari (screen-based storytelling). In both of these forms, the storyteller orally narrates the stories of legendary figures. The protagonists of *Sparrows* remind readers of the most celebrated actual commanders of the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>64</sup>

However, that is not all there is before the novel starts. After the title page, a short single line appears on the next page, yet another reference to and a slightly modified hemistich from a much debated and famous poem by the most celebrated poet of fourteenth-century Persia, the renowned mystic poet of love, Hafez. The context of the stanza is about the plurality of perspectives in regard to the interpretation of Islam and the sectarian division it has given rise to. In that poem, Hafez asserts that there is only one simple Truth or path toward God and those who could not see or comprehend it diverged into different interpretations of God/Islam. For Hafez, sectarian divisions are “the fancy or fable that preoccupy those who have not struck out on the mystical path.”<sup>65</sup> Instead of the third-person articulation of the original poem, the author of

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<sup>64</sup> Some critiques in Iran have divided war writing into two distinct categories; war literature and Literature of Resistance or Literature of Sacred Defense. In this categorization the former includes literature from all the world that existed in ancient world but flourished from the eighteenth century with the start of the novel. Literature of Resistance is born with Iran-Iraq War. See, Hanif Mohammad, and Mohsen Hanif. *Kand o Kavi Piramoone Adabiat e Dastani e Jang va Defa Moghaddas [Exploring the Fictional Literature of War and Sacred Defense]*. Sarir. 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Two different translations of this poem are discussed by Roy Mottahedeh in “Pluralism and Islamic Traditions of Sectarian Divisions” (158).

Heaven was too weak to bear the burden of responsibility  
 — they gave it to my poor crazy self.  
 Forgive the war of the seventy-two warring religions;  
 Since they did not see the truth They  
 have struck out on the road of fancy.

*Sparrows* inserts his own first-person voice: “since truth / [my emphasis] could not see, the path of myths I took”.<sup>66</sup> What Bani Ameri suggests with this reference is that the mythical and fictional nature of the particular story of war that is about to unfold challenges the normal way of understanding, telling, and representing traumatic history, since the “truth” of the traumatic event defies a single straightforward telling, representation, and interpretation. The author does not know how to relate the events of brutal and chaotic nature without distorting and mystifying them, supporting the view proposed in this dissertation that the “quality of otherness” of the trauma narrative lies precisely in the fact that the experience of trauma defies reality and, therefore, only one straightforward recounting of the experience. As Dori Laub explains in “Bearing Witness,”

“The traumatic event, although real, [takes] place outside the parameters of ‘normal’ reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of ‘otherness,’ a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery” (69).

Bani Ameri’s account of the Iran-Iraq war delivers all these contradictions of normality and the reality of the traumatic experience. *Sparrows* blurs the distinctions between fiction and reality and exposes the difficulty of narrating an event that is chaotic and overwhelming in nature; it does so by using different forms of representation in combination: modernist techniques, visual narrative, and the surreal continuity of a truth that never resolves.

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<sup>66</sup> The translation is mine. The original stanza: جنگ هفتاد و دو ملت همه را عذر بنه چون ندیدند حقیقت ره افسانه زدند

## تابلوی اول: غوص و قنچ

### The First Panel: Diving and the Rainbow

On the page following the titles, Bani Amari introduces the first and major panel titled, "Ghos va Ghozah," meaning "Diving and the Rainbow". This title refers to the history of the main character Alijan and how he drowns at the border between Iraq and Iran, in the 200 km long Arvand river. An authoritative statement then follows the title:

It is only I who speak, and write, it doesn't matter from whose point of view or with what name. The important thing is that I am the only chief narrator who completes the story. And one day, I will come and tell all the truth. We all had better wait for that day to come. I will return... again... if I survive.

This succession of complex titling, divisions, references, and statements invites decoding and interpretation. Why does Bani Ameri rely so much on intertextual references to historical and classical literary figures? Why is the "I" highlighted in the very initial staging of this illustrated, performative narrative? And what is the significance of a subject with no identity? The intertextual quality of these first three pages, with their references to prominent literary figures like Jami and Hafez, and of Shamayel Gardani, a religious and iconic performance of Shiite history and identity, sets the stage for a reading composed of different mediums of representation. Yet the very presence of the highlighted "I," it may be argued, contradicts the very core meaning of intertextuality. Despite all the references, this ambiguous voice claims its own authority, credibility, and legitimacy as an influential and viable storyteller, "the chief narrator" who instructs the reader of the voice's sole claim to truth.

When first introduced as a poststructuralist idea, intertextuality was intended to limit author-centered criticism and interpretations of a text, thus allowing for a plurality of meanings. Roland Barthes criticized the reading and criticism of a text that relied on the identity of the author, his political or religious views, ethnicity or psychology. For Barthes "to give a text an

author" and assign a single, matching interpretation to it "is to impose a limit on that text" (143). He considered the author more as an "inscriptor" who produced but could not explain the meaning of the text, and his aim was to disrupt the traditional equation of "author" and "authority." Barthes suggested that words create meaning for the reader and that we could never know what a writer intended to do in his work, "Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin" (143).

The very fact of Bani Amari's emphasis on the "I" of the anonymous speaker before the novel begins, however, appears to express opposition to this view and raises a number of additional questions: is this speaker who wishes to convince the reader of the significance of his voice Bani Amari himself; if so, what is behind his claim to be the only narrator and architect of the story; and (why) is his version of the events the only "truth"? With his assertion of the authorial "I," the voice seems to want to reclaim his influence as the one who has seen and experienced something no one else has, thus making his story a testimony, a form of bearing witness to a reality outside the normality of everyday experience. Yet the author's ambiguity, in stripping the subject from his identity circles back to Barthes's idea of the destruction of a singular authority over meaning of the text and the event. But whose authority does the author wish to dismantle? Paradoxically, Bani Ameri uses multiple genres and mediums of representation, a path of many fancies and fables in the service of this wish to maintain a singular claim to the truth of Alijan's life and death in the course of the Iran-Iraq war – to "tell all the truth" – all the while suspending the identity of the speaker and revelation of truth until the very end of the novel.



**Red and: The Blue of Waves**

“How could he be alive when forty days ago the reporters from all around the world were filming his corpse?” (Bani Ameri 11). The title of the first chapter in *Sparrows*, “Red and: The Blue of Waves,” relates the sudden return of a dead protagonist. The immediate start of the narrative establishes the colorful images that the title pages have promised. As he plays with his young twin daughters, Danial succeeds in killing a cockroach on the wall right next to the framed watercolor portrait of his beloved, martyred friend, Alijan Mir Moayer. The gross brown substance of the dead cockroach’s body oozes and contaminates the painting of the smiling Alijan, staining his dark green shirt. The incident foreshadows what is to follow in the novel, staining a historic and heroic figure. A mysterious phone call disrupts the normalcy of everyday life of Danial’s family, and as it is eventually revealed, simultaneously upsets the lives of all the close associates of Alijan. The familiar voice on the other end of the call resembles precisely the voice of Alijan, who was shot, killed, and drowned in the Arvand River during a battle and whose body remained missing for eight years, until forty days prior to when the novel begins. The return of Alijan’s unharmed body from the depth of the Arvand River is marked all over the country, where everyone is preparing for his memorial – in the capital Tehran, in his place of residence in Shiraz, and even in Paveh, where the bloody scene of events took place. His voice on the other end of the call, however, puts these events on pause and leads Danial to remember the story of Alijan’s death. Though wishing he could forever forget the hole the bullet made through his friend’s throat, Danial takes the film of Alijan’s burial procession off the shelf. While viewing the film meticulously, noting the most detailed expressions on people’s faces at the funeral, Danial simultaneously checks his own memories. “Who has been in that coffin then,

if not Alijan?” (Bani Ameri 24). He begins to narrate the story the way a sports reporter relates with great precision the unfolding of events at a game. Danial’s description of even the slightest incidents are narrated like a slow-motion film, including the photos he has taken in Alijan’s funeral of:

Narges and Mina [Danial’s two daughters] in [Danial’s wife] Mahan’s arms and the pack of almonds in their hands and the happy smile on their face[...] and from an old woman who opened a keffiyeh and with her left shaky hand took a small piece of her son’s skull out from among a prayer beads and a ring and said ‘this is the only piece that is remained of my dear son’ and behind her a luminous chamber with a photo of her son and smiling Alijan side by side. And from Ali Ashraf in his diving suit, who is beating his chest among the crowd, chanting Alijan, Alijan, Alijan. (Bani Ameri 25)

In a melancholic reaction to his death/disappearance, Ali Ashraf, a major character of the novel (who as a youth is also called by his Kurdish name Asoo), puts on a diving suit every night to search for his half-brother and best friend in the river until he finds him eight years later. The photo of Ali Ashraf in the diving suit, taken during the funeral procession, brings the narrator back to the battlefields eight years back when, freshly graduated from college as a theatre and film major, he hides a camera in his back pack and accompanies Alijan on a mission to the war zone in Paveh. The local Kurds in Paveh are divided between their loyalty to their Kurdish identity and to the independence movement and their faithfulness to the central government. Alijan and Danial devise a plan in which both will wear local Kurdish dress while Danial pretends to be mute and Alijan, also in disguise, pretends to be blind—in order to survive the circumstances in which the rebellious and separatist Kurds fear and fight the central government militia. It is a situation in which no one trusts anyone and everyone fears everyone.

From these days, when they first got to see Ali Ashraf, there is one single photograph that has remained. The narrator recollects the events that led to taking that photo in the past by looking at it in the present:

[...] one can sense fear in the eyes too, even if the eyes are blue. And I saw fear in Asoo's blue eyes. And now I'd like to think that I've seen fear of them both in the green eyes of the little girl – Goole Bakh – who was sitting on Asoo's shoulders. The flash fired just after Goole Bakh's cute smile, a tilted head with a world of happiness caused simply by taking a ride on a strange boy's shoulder. Neglectful of the fact that only ten minutes earlier her parents had both been killed in front of my and Alijan's eyes.[...] And even more strange was Asoo's smile in reaction to Goole Bakh's childish happiness, right when from every corner of Paveh shootings could be heard [...] Even imagining some images are hard, let alone talking about them. [...] Asoo still remembers this smile, even at the moment that his mother's head rolled and rolled until it stopped at his feet, near his Kurdish shoes. (Bani Ameri 26)

Danial's eyes blur on reexamining and remembering the details and memories of this photo. The voices of his two girls start to fade in the background as the voice of Alijan in the past dominates the other voices, telling Danial to "hurry up!" (Bani Ameri 26). The remembrance of the past is a result of triggering incidents, and yet the fading of the voices in the present happens, not as a result of an uncontrollable sudden flashback, but as the intentional and conscious act of a film director who plays with sound and image. Danial even directs the way he remembers: "I try to convince myself that I cannot hear the girls from their room. It's impossible not to hear them, but their voices can be faded until Alijan's voice is heard..." (Bani Ameri 26). The occasion of reviewing the film and the photographs of the day of the funeral leads to the recollection of Danial and Alijan's mission in Paveh and of Alijan's search for his half-brother Asoo (Ali Ashraf) and his stepmother Jinoo. Through the photographs and film, the narrator becomes a witness who is in control of his flashbacks and his memories. For every scene in which Danial remembers and describes, a photographic image is engraved in the reader's mind. In the middle of chaos, walking through the war-trodden city, though he cannot bring out his camera to take a picture, Danial memorizes the scenes to make sure the reality is recorded. He describes the events with his journalist gaze. Detached and objective, he later incorporates his interviews with the survivors to bear witness to the truth of his visual memories.

About one-third into the novel, with its confusing mixture of timelines and voices, the reader realizes that the narrator is set up in opposition to the author. It is Danial Delfam, the documentary director and photojournalist in the battlefields, who claims authority over the narration of the unfolding events. He sets himself up against the author, Bani Ameri, and quarrels with him to get him out of the picture. By calling Danial the narrator, the author makes continuous attempts to gather information about Alijan. Danial made a documentary about the return of Alijan's unharmed body from the Arvand River which was broadcast by the media. Having seen the documentary, the author wants to know more in order to write a novel about Alijan. His insistence on getting in touch with the narrator irritates Danial to the point where he names the author "Mr. Tick," referring to the blood-feeding insect. For Danial, the lens of the war photographer and the gaze of the journalist are the only reliable sources for the reconstruction of the past and Alijan's character. He denies the author's right to this history. The conflicting voices of the author and narrator represent a collision between the eyewitness accounts of a war correspondent and photojournalist with that of a fiction writer and their claims to represent truth.

### نارنجی و : آبی مد

### **Orange and: The Blue of the Tide**

Each of the seven sections – the Seven Thrones, or *Haft Owrang* – in *Sparrows* is titled by the different colors of the rainbow and each contains colorful and photographic imagery of the unfolding events of the past as remembered in the present. Water is the major setting for the novel, given that the protagonist is born in water, dies in water, and his body emerges whole from water. Actual rainbows appear in seven colors because water droplets break white sunlight into the seven-color spectrum (*red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet*). In the novel,

memories of love, loss, fear, fire, and death are remembered through the colorful combination of light and water. Memories of the past are constructed out of the narrator's personal interviews, witnesses' oral accounts of the incidents, and the documentaries he recorded during and after the war. In the first section the narrator's blue wave of life is jolted by a phone call that stirs his emotions and triggers the memories of that bloody day. In the second of the seven sections, 'Orange and: The Blue of the Tide,' the seven thrones, seven photographs, seven films emphasize the wave of chaos that surges, created by events of the war.

Two different types of images appear throughout the novel: the real photographs and films that the narrator/journalist has taken and recorded and the collection of images that frame his memory. The first real photograph – the one taken of Ali Ashraf with the little girl Goole Bakh who he rescues after her parents are murdered – leads Danial to remember the events of that day in the form of the next seven sets of remembered images. In the photo, both Ali Ashraf and the little girl on his shoulders are smiling amiably immediately after they have witnessed brutal murders during the most chaotic and bloody day of battle in Paveh. The second set of real images are contained in film footage Danial recorded at the end of the bloody day of resistance and fight in Paveh, when supporting forces arrive to break the siege and Alijan, the narrator, and their company are rescued. Though Danial acknowledges that the images are blurred and "have not come out well" (Bani Ameri 162), he assembles them nonetheless and adds audio and voice to make the film watchable, allowing the victorious and happy moment of rescue to be successfully archived.

The division of images into a physical material record on the one hand and remembered images on the other challenges the reality recorded and presented in the official narrative and reveals its potential contradictory nature, as the images engraved in memory can never be

physically and visibly reproduced or publicized. The next seven images – photographs and filmic – are the products of the narrator’s photographic memory, the ones he wishes he had taken on camera. This group of images carry a more romanticized and epic version of the traumatic events, as those of traditional coffee house illustration, stored in Danial’s memory. Some vividly portray the incomprehensibility of the events.

I did not have access to a camera in that moment. It didn’t even cross my mind. Otherwise I would have taken it out and recorded this moment. Now it can only be imagined that Hero [Asoo’s Horse] could stand on his feet, two front hooves in the air, roaring, his forelock covering the right eye. [...] And the cyclist in the background of this image, under Hero’s feet, with fearful eyes, open mouth, bloody face, and bloodier Kurdish clothes, and the trace of his motorcycle’s smoke. (Bani Ameri 65)

The narrator admits that the events of that day happened so fast that they could only be accurately recorded with still photographs or films. Nevertheless, he suggests, they can be vividly remembered years later, and in “this way, can become more beautiful, long-lasting” (Bani Ameri 65). At this point the narrator reveals seven photographic images of the most traumatic moments of the past, inserting recollections of a particular event as told by his interviewees in the present, followed by a description of the slow-motion movements of the incidents themselves. The result is a documentary created through a photographic montage recreated in written words, that is, imagery without a narrative content, but with voice-over narration created through writing, after the event has passed.

Susan Sontag has written that one of the functions of photographs is that they “furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we are shown a photograph of it.” She also asserts that, although a painting or a prose description “can never be anything other than a narrowly selective interpretation,” a photograph can be treated as a “narrowly selective transparency” (5-6). Bani Ameri’s narrative, however, challenges this claim. In the novel, the real photographs and films taken by Danial record moments of relative stability; it is

only in his memory that extreme chaotic moments are registered with relative clarity and vividness. What actually “furnishes evidence” are his explicit memories of real traumatic events. The sweet, chocolatey smile of Goole Bakh riding on Ali Ashraf’s shoulders does nothing to inform the viewer of the bloody murder of her parents or Ali Ashraf’s uncle right before the photograph was taken. The photograph excludes any evidence of their recent personal experience of trauma, while Danial’s memory can register it without discrimination years later.

The very first photograph the narrator describes depicts the starting point of a series of actions that will unfold. Having arrived in the neighborhood of the hospital to sell their goods, Asoo (Ali Ashraf’s given Kurdish name) and his mother Jinoo find themselves in the midst of a siege and the resulting chaos. Following his mother’s order, Asoo rides his beloved horse to bring his uncle and wife to the hospital, which seems to be the only safe place as several helicopters from the central government arrive loaded with weaponry to transport the wounded. In the photograph, “Alijan’s gaze is fixed on Jinoo and Jinoo’s on Ali Ashraf, who is running toward Hero. Jinoo’s lips seem to be saying ‘Asoo’. Jinoo’s gaze shows fear in uttering the word ‘Asoo’ (Bani Ameri 65). In the photograph that follows: “A few bullets have been emptied into the chest of a wounded cyclist, who is now on his knees. He had screamed, with hands raised up in a fist. His large eyes wanted to believe in death, but couldn’t. [...] And Alijan in the background, has fallen to the ground and has turned his head, looking at the cyclist, or his motorcycle. My bag and my hand are at the corner of the photograph. And Hero and Asoo, their backs toward us, have marched and gone toward an alley that is burning in fire” (68-69). Amidst the bloody chaos, while the narrator rides the motorcycle with Alijan to follow Asoo, he expresses his ecstasy in hearing the galloping of the beautiful horse ahead of them, and he enjoys the ride: “I was thinking, what a joy motorcycling in a city full of bloodshed and massacre.

Zigzagging in the streets, skipping the bullets. Not paying attention to the men warning us to stop, and even laughing was so enjoyable that it was worth the danger” (Bani Ameri 71).

The third photograph is described as if a slow-motion film depicts the broken doors and windows belonging to Asoo’s uncle. Through slow descriptive narrative the reader is led to a scene of civilian casualty. Asoo arrives too late, only to find the uncle and his wife both shot to death by separatists. A bloody hand holding on to a handful of chestnuts is sticking out of the broken window, and Asoo, on his horse, still not knowing what has happened inside the house has turned his head and is smiling at the site of falling chestnuts, fixed between the window and the ground. The narrator describes the scene in this way, “the sky is above, bluer than ever, and it is riding on the back of the mountains, and on the falls, and on the rocky houses, and on the green forest, right there in front” (Bani Ameri 73).

The description of the pictorial memories are all short, single statements chained together like a train by a coordinating conductor, in this case *and*. This deliberate choice affirms the continuity of memories: they are happening now in the present just the way they were seen and experienced. The reader can experience the events live and in slow motion rather than as events long passed. Through this descriptive narrative, the reader feels compelled to stay on the scene for a bit longer. The narrative slows the brutal and bloody chaos, preventing a hurried look or a simple turning away. As Sontag has suggested, “Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (89). Even though these photographs are illusory and non-existent, outside the narrative, the narrator places his memory of the events in their framed images and makes them move so that he can make us, the readers, both understand and be haunted by them. In *Sparrows*, photographs are used by the narrator to prove the reality of the war and his own possession of the past, the details of which no longer remain certain. To get



closer to the reality of war, photography and film become important tools of documentation, and therefore communication. The narrator/journalist's insistence on presenting his memories in a visual format, and his back-and-forth quarrel with the writer, however, also seem to reflect the view that the reality of traumatic experience is something only a witness to it has the right or ability to tell.

The issue of the effect and influence of images of war on viewers, however, raises additional questions. Susan Sontag cautioned about the seductiveness of such images; "IS THERE AN ANTIDOTE to the perennial seductiveness of war? [...] Could one be mobilized to actively oppose war by an image?" (122, capitals in original). In many of the images the narrator has fixed in his memory, there is a sense of adventurous beauty in the chaos of war. Recall the narrator's description of his feeling of "joy motorcycling in a city full of bloodshed and massacre" immediately before a brutal and bloody death will occur. The images as described by the narrator do not provoke his denunciation of human cruelty or human savagery. It could be argued that the narrator's descriptions of scenes paint a romanticized image of the reality of death and destruction. Bani Amari has himself suggested that the description of war necessitates the use of colors. The images he carefully paints for the reader are reminders of the war paintings of Chalipa and Khosrojerdi discussed in the first chapter, in which the bold colors that saturate the scene aim toward a symbolic representation of the meaning of death rather than the external factors of war. The colors invoked in *Sparrows*, on the contrary, are Bani Ameri's attempts at realist descriptions of life as it is and war as it was: "I wanted to be realistic," he confesses (personal interview).

There is another dimension to describing the death and annihilation of human beings through a rainbow of bright colors. Blood red is set amidst the green of the forest and the blue of the sky. These colors saturate the images of brutal death. This romanticizing of death in war

objectifies the human body and human dignity, turning the body to a “thing” that can be blended into the beauty of nature. “Beautifying” states Sontag, “is one classic operation of the camera, and it tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown” (81). The first set of descriptive photographs presented by the narrator/photojournalist in *Sparrows*, contrary to Bani Ameri’s statement, are not realist in tone, only in their colors; they don’t appear to have as their objective the invocation of pain in the viewer/reader. Instead, the images resemble fine art photography in which, instead of capturing a realistic rendition of the subject, the photographer aims to produce a more personal – typically atmospheric and idealistic – impression, where the intention is mainly aesthetic. The narration that accompanies these images is primarily descriptive. Both the images and the narrative remain truer to the romanticized reality depicted in late eighteenth-century Romanticism, where the emphasis was on intense emotions such as apprehension, horror, and awe and, in Bani Ameri’s case, awe-inspiring description.

There is a similar trace in Bani Ameri’s images of a subject confronting new aesthetic categories, regarding, for example the sublimity and beauty of nature found in that period. This romanticized representation of death can be seen in the exaggeration of the forms of the body and the bold colors, as in scenes of the Crucifixion, that result in the sublimation of the brutal nature of war and turn the battlefield into a spectacle, and the victim and warrior into heroes, with the scene of death becoming something to be watched with awe and admiration. In contrast, Sontag identifies “uglifying” or “showing something at its worst,” as a more modern function: “didactic, it invites an active response” (81).

The narrative of *Sparrows* is a combination of odd forms. Despite imitating certain modernist techniques, such as the use of extreme fragmentation, to the point of confusion, it also uses more classical techniques of photographic imagery, methods that approximate the paintings

of the Romantic era. “For photographs to accuse and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock” (81). The narrative itself is an overwhelmingly fragmented account of history. It disobeys traditional plots, sequences, even grammar, and logic so much so that it becomes a pastiche of different voices and different stories like those of iconic modernist novelists such as Virginia Woolf. The difference though, is that *Sparrows* incorporates statements from the narrator’s interviewees in sometimes short and single sentences as a tool of realist and documentary style construction of an event. Dialogue becomes a major component for the reconstruction of history, whereas in modernist writing the internal monologue is the prominent feature used to highlight subjective rather than objective reality. Bani Ameri has been criticized by some scholars for using an unconventional style in recounting objective events where his intentions are the glorification of heroic characters (Sedighi and Saidi 195-216).<sup>67</sup> The narrator plays the role of a tailor stitching together pieces of photography, film, and interviews to construct the life of a single character over a few hours in a single day, like that of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Yet, despite the fragmentation of sequence and story line, the intentions are to build a specific character from scratch and to make a complete image of him. The numbered and divided frames are configured into a slow-motion, coherent story, despite the fragmentation of their individual narrative. The hybrid narrative that emerges relies heavily on photography, film, and interviews, taking the form of a documentary whose form and architecture comes close to postmodern “radical eclecticism.”<sup>68</sup> In this way, in contrast to the claims of the novel’s critics, the narrator challenges the traditional forms of testimony and historiography in narrative through the use of different mediums and styles of modernist writing. The narrative of this novel suggests that perhaps even

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<sup>67</sup> So far, to my knowledge, this is the only scholarly article published on Bani Ameri’s novel. In this article the authors place the novel in the same category of Sacred Defense writing.

<sup>68</sup> Eclecticism is a kind of mixed style in the fine arts: “the borrowing of a variety of styles from different sources and combining them” (Hume 5).

empirical reality in historiography, similar to the psychical experience of the subject, should be based on bits and pieces of many subjective experiences, since real events do not follow simply the norms of realist narrativization. The author's faith in reality through the use of photography and film is combined with the stream of consciousness narrative to reflect the experience of war violence that defies encapsulation into a straightforward and comprehensible story, attempting to address the "representational paradox" of giving satisfactorily expression to traumatic events (Rothberg 205).

Among the seven photographs and seven films that Danial describes to the reader, the sixth is perhaps the most traumatic, realistic, and disturbing. The pilot of the helicopter that has arrived to transport the dead and wounded is shot by snipers when taking off. The helicopter hits the hills that surround the hospital, loses control, and the spinning propeller begins to crash into people on the ground. The events of this day – the same day that Ali Asrhaf and his mother Jinoo arrive and get caught in the action and when Jinoo is decapitated by the propeller – are based in historical reality and are later remembered by the commander in chief Dr. Chamran, fictionalized as Emad in the story, as the most horrific events of his life. The narrator describes these moments in detail in the novel:

The Sixth Photograph: The splash of blood on Emad's eye glasses and face. The lopsided image of the helicopter in one of the glasses and the image of Jinoo in another, standing, with hands toward the sky, without a head.

Aunt Jinoo fell into the ground, right in front of my eyes and I said, "Auntie... ."

And I felt nauseous. This was the first time I saw a body without a head this close.

Ali Ashraf Said: "What can I say? I watched as my mother's head roll and roll on the ground until it reached my feet."

The Sixth Slow-Motion: The helicopter's propeller spinning amidst the smoke and fog of the dust and the loud noise of its engine. Jinoo's head falling on the ground and rolling. And Alijan's stunned gaze. Jinoo's hands clutching the ground. My coughs and horrified gaze on the helicopter. It's still on and is wavering, and the corpse of the pilot hanging

from it. [...] Jinoo's head rolling on the ground. A man is beating his head to the wall. Jinoo's head rolling on the ground. A woman covering her eyes and screaming by all her might. Jinoo's head rolling on the ground. Rahman's looking all around him, bewildered, and his screams directed toward the sky. Jinoo's head rolling on the ground. Gorgin biting his lips, trying to stay calm and a drop of tear rolling down from a corner of one of his eyes. Jinoo's head rolling on the ground. Alijan's hands coming forward to take Jinoo's shaking hands and putting them on his face, [...] Jinoo's head rolling on the ground. A red hole in the middle of a man's forehead right when he is screaming "God". [...] Jinoo's head rolling on the ground. The galloping sound of the horse and the head reaching to the tip of Ali Ashraf's Kurdish shoes. Goole Bakh's stunned gaze on the ground [fixed on the head]. The empty look of Ali Ashraf fixed on Jinoo's head. [...] his gaze staring straight ahead. (Bani Ameri 118-119)

The narration of this traumatic memory involves fragmented, passive, repetitive, short, and run-on sentences. The narrator repeats seven times the phrase "Jinoo's head rolling on the ground," marking this as the central image of the event. This phrasing is used to illustrate one of the unique characteristics of traumatic memories according to Van Der Kolk and others, that is, they tend to be organized on the "sensory-motor and affective level". Observations in clinical studies on hundreds of children and adults who have experienced trauma confirm:

that traumatic experiences initially are organized without semantic representations and that 'memories' of the trauma tend to, at least initially, be predominantly experienced as fragments of the sensory components of the event: as visual images, olfactory, auditory, or kinesthetic sensations, or intense waves of feelings (which patients usually claim to be representations of elements of the original traumatic event). (van der Kolk and Fisler 513)

In the presentation of events in the sixth scene, multiple components of sensory perceptions are employed by Danial. The event itself does not include an exchange of communication at the time of traumatic incident it is only after the fact, perhaps years later, that Danial and Ali Ashraf are able to "talk" about the event in these three lines of dialogue embedded within the portrayal of the event: "Aunt Jinoo fell into the ground, right in front of my eyes and I said, 'Auntie... .' And I felt nauseous. This was the first time I saw a body without a head this close. Ali Ashraf Said: 'What can I say? I watched as my mother's head roll and roll until it reached my feet.'"

Regarding traumatic memory, Van Der Kolk suggests that “terrifying experiences may be remembered with extreme vividness” and that it is only over time that subjects gradually develop a personal narrative that can be properly referred to as “explicit memory” or “narrative memory” (van der Kolk and Fisler 508). Even after the event, in a state of high arousal, subjects may fail to give a coherent narrative of the event. Yet that inability to give a coherent account does not interfere with their implicit memory as “they may ‘know’ the emotional valence of a stimuli and be aware of associated perceptions, without being able to articulate the reasons for feeling or behaving in a particular way.” (van der Kolk S101) It is clearly evident in the photographs and films that the narrator describes in their most vivid content that the memory of traumatic events remains graphic while the words associated with the process of narrating events with a highly emotional content remain fragmented, short and crippled. It has been well documented that the significance of an event, the consequences involved, how distinct it is, personal connection and involvement in the event, and proximity increase the accuracy of recollection of flashbulb memories. (Sharot 1376-80). The clarity of traumatic memory experienced by trauma sufferers recalls the concept of the flashbulb memory in which these traumatic memories can be even more accurate than everyday memories.

### **Bani Ameri and Modernism**

Bani Ameri’s *Sparrow* draws on several modes of thinking reflected in literary modernism which emerged from the sense of crisis, disillusion, alienation, and growing pessimism that characterized the first half of the twentieth century. His novel covers a single day of life of his characters with fragmented timeline and narrative resembling one of the most significant modernist novels *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) by one the most prominent modernist writers, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, an exemplary model of literary

modernism at its height, is an account of a single day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class English woman who is preparing for her party after the end of the First World War. Heavily focused on the inner psychological struggles, meditations, and impressions of reality of its characters, Woolf juxtaposes Clarissa's world with that of a shell-shocked veteran of the war, Septimus Smith. Through the simple and ordinary act of walking through London from her home to buy flowers for her party and back home as the party is already in session, Woolf introduces a variety of characters through a psychoanalytic excavation of their inner thoughts and emotions. With little use of dialogue, the fragmented narrative swiftly changes from one perspective to another, from past to present and back again, imitating a traumatized psyche in which a sense of time is lost to continuous flashbacks and the constant reliving of the past in the present moment. Shell-shock, a common embodied consequence of war, becomes a major theme of *Mrs. Dalloway*. The characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* are attempting to navigate their present as well as their past, which makes them who they have become; they wrestle with conformity to their beliefs, long-held values regarding human life, and their doubt about the structures and conventions of the present society. The fragmented narrative in the novel represents their fragmented selves and their fragmented identity. Septimus Smith experiences the impossibility and difficulty of putting back together a complete sense of self and of Clarissa Dalloway's struggles to find a meaningful position in relation to herself and the rest of society.

*Sparrows*, though similar to Woolf's novel in its fragmented form and emphasis on a singular event in its characters' lives, is not particularly interested in presenting a psychoanalytic reading of its characters. The author/narrator is not interested in a plurality of perspectives. On the contrary, he confesses that he wants only one narrator to tell his story:

Now that I have put together all what others have said, and by mixing together and digging through the far and near past and present, I have made a single image out of all

images and all times that has now become one single subjective time. The idea gave me the courage to experiment, by which I mean what I have done in imagining these seven photographs and seven slow-motion sequences. From all the actual and personal visual images, both mine and others, I have created coherent and singular images that I might not have been a part of personally, but I have had the final influence on them. By which I mean that the narrative of the photograph or film is my narrative, but this “I” has turned to be the omniscient narrator who has seen it all to the point that it sometimes has even ignored myself. (Bani Ameri 95)

The tyranny of this obsessed, omniscient narrator with his own version of historical truth reaches the point of neglecting the emotional and subjective experiences of his characters, a gesture toward the one-dimensional presentation of war experience and the status quo that surrounds the events. Ali Ashraf, who seems to be the person most affected by the horrific traumatic experiences that started in his teen years, is never heard from directly. The narrator never allows him to tell his own story. He is a witness to his hometown’s destruction by the war and to the decapitation of his mother, who he buries with his own hands. The devastating effect of the loss of his beloved half-brother Alijan, who is shot and drowned in the depths of water right before his eyes, is only revealed through his actions, constantly diving in the waters to look for him. This continuous search for the body of his lost brother and comrade is the only sign of his traumatic disorder in the novel. He repeatedly puts on a diving suit and jumps into almost any water anywhere, not necessarily even the river in which Alijan was lost. As Caruth has indicated, “For the survivor of trauma, the truth of the event may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension. The flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility” (Caruth 153). Ali Ashraf’s reenactment of survivor’s guilt in the loss of his brother affirms the impossibility of comprehending and therefore working through his trauma. And the lines that are quoted from his perspective, “What can I say? I watched my mother’s head roll and roll until it reached my feet,” convey an extreme internal turmoil associated with an image that will be



remembered over and again for the rest of his life. At the same time, the repetition of both action and memory serves to convey a different relation to the truth of the event itself, one that is contradictory to most of the photographic narratives of the photojournalist, an affective and emotional relation that is not recordable in any photograph. Ali Ashraf's PTSD is one of the most frequently unspoken and unrepresented consequences of war, left out of most literature and art of war.

Through fragments of scattered recollections, the scene of Alijan's death is finally constructed toward the end of the novel. Ali Ashraf, as it turns out, has carried within him for a long time a secret suspicion, rage, and guilt. On that day long ago, his witnessing of Alijan's death occurs as their regiment crosses the river, each holding on to a rope and walking in chained procession, when he hears the splashing sound of water behind him. Ali Gol, who after Alijan's death will marry his widow, is behind Alijan. They know a bullet has gone through Alijan's throat by the rattling and grunting sound they hear from him. Alijan lets go of the rope to hold on to his throat, and the rest of story is never told either by Ali Ashraf or Ali Gol. However, Ali Ashraf angrily remarks to the narrator: "what the hell is Ali Gol doing in Alijan's home now?" [...] What right does he have to change his name to Yahya and then go and live in Alijan's house?" (Bani Ameri 398). He seems to be reflecting his suspicion that Ali Gol intentionally drowned Alijan, in order to silence the involuntary noises he was making and avoid the regiment's exposure to the enemy on the other side of the river, that is, to prevent their own deaths. An even more morally charged claim is that Ali Gol's intention in drowning Alijan was, perhaps, to take over his life and marry his wife Hania. The truth is never told, but the narrator suggests in passing that both Ali Ashraf and Hania herself carry this disturbing secret with them. Alijan's death, as seen in this light, is not a sacred death as celebrated in the status quo, but a

mystery, and that raises questions about the ethical nature of war and its consequences in the lives of those who survive it.

### آبی و: آبی شفاف

#### **Blue and: Transparent Blue**

“Exposure-based” treatments require PTSD patients to give a comprehensive oral or written narrative of their traumatic event and to come into conscious contact with reminders of trauma by revisiting the trauma through sight. The treatment thus tends to both draw out uncontrolled traumatic images and persuade patients to direct their attention to such images in a systematic way (Brewin et al. 220). The rationale behind this approach is to draw out what Caruth calls “unclaimed experience;” experience that has not been fully known and grasped when it happened, yet returns and demands understanding beyond its initial registration in emotional and sensational consciousness.

In a similar fashion, the chapter “Blue and: Transparent Blue” that appears in the middle of the novel, represents a therapeutic process for Hania. The first person narrative of this chapter is dedicated to Hania’s account of her experience as a volunteer in the war zone, where she first meets Alijan. When Hania is introduced to the reader, she is married to her second husband Yahya, a supportive and loving man and a comrade of Alijan. She is portrayed as a soft-spoken, dignified, and reserved woman, someone who clearly has unresolved emotions toward the loss of her husband—she hardly talks. Her silence indicates her inability to confront the reality of a loss that she has not fully grasped and perhaps, as Ali Ashraf indicates, the fact that she may possess knowledge of a murder. Repressed and silenced, these unresolved emotions push her to the limit. On different occasions throughout the novel, Danial the narrator tries to understand Alijan from Hania’s perspective, but she refuses to talk. Whenever Alijan is remembered, she has outbursts

of emotional reactions and flees into solitude to shed her tears. When she feels downhearted, she usually reads from a collection of lyrics by Hafez that Alijan had given her as a gift. Not having seen the dead body in its proper burial place, the grave, leaves a mark on Hania's psyche. Not being able to confirm his material loss, the lost love becomes encrypted within her, pushing her into silent solitude. The night that Alijan's body is discovered in Arvand, Hania comes forward to confirm the identity of the body. It doesn't take long for her to break her silence. Soon after, she shows up in Danial's office to talk: "She was like a person who hasn't talked for years or had a stutter that was now cured, she wanted to spill out all she had kept inside" (Bani Ameri 219)

Caruth has been criticized for resisting the integration of traumatic memory into the language of consciousness as a step toward healing, since she feels that such attempts may threaten the loss of "the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*" (Caruth 154; Krockel 153-186). She suggests that this is the very dilemma that pushes many survivors into silence and makes them reluctant to "translate their experience into speech" (Caruth 154). As a Holocaust survivor Schreiber Weitz has claimed, "[to] speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible" (Caruth 154). This inherent tension – the will to speak and the will to deny speech – confirms the difficulty of understanding the traumatic event, due to the subject's excessive knowledge of that event which is resistant to externalization and narration. In response to her critics, Caruth emphasizes that she does not believe that speech denies the truth of the event or is the absolute refutation of understanding trauma. Her claim is that the "danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory lies not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much" (Caruth 154). To speak about trauma, Caruth seems to suggest, is to "move away from the experience of shock by reintegrating it into a stable understanding of it" (154). The fear of transmitting the traumatic past into speech and narration

is the fear of “sacrilege” with respect to the traumatic experience (Caruth 154).<sup>69</sup> The simultaneous disbelief in and truth of a brutal death, as happened in Hania’s experience of war and loss, was translated first into a long period of silence and only eventually into a narrative based on her memory. This narrativization, however, does not close all the gaps of secrecy and incomprehension; it reveals some truth and at the same time opens up more gaps.

The encounter with Alijan’s dead body serves as a cathartic moment for Hania. The sight of his body liberates her unspoken words. This liberating force of verbalizing the traumatic event is encoded in the blue color of the title. It reflects both the calm that finally sets into Hania’s silent melancholia, and the composed and tranquil atmosphere of the novel as finally Alijan’s fragmented history, his disappeared body, and Hania’s version of truth become whole. As long as Alijan’s body was missing, Hania lived a life of both hope and fear of his return. After the discovery of the body, now convinced by his death, memories pour into Hania’s narrative and her history opens up. Though still non-chronological and fragmented, this chapter offers the most coherent narrative memory of the traumatic past. It is the only section of the novel that is related from a single perspective. The narrator states that he deliberately lets this chapter follow Hania’s account, without letting others’ memories interfere with hers. He guarantees the reader that, after he transcribes Hania’s recorded voice into writing, he will try to fill in the gaps and put the missing information he has found from other people’s interviews into her narrative, signifying their insertion with quotes and italics. This deliberate choice makes it easier for the reader to follow the sequence of events, compared to the rest of the narrative where unexpected lines from multiple characters continuously disrupt the flow of the text.

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<sup>69</sup> Caruth brings this evidence from Van der Kolk and Van der Hart’s observations.

Through Hania's own remembrances of the past, the reader is surprised to find out that she, despite the fact that she is presented with such a calm demeanor in the present, had chosen to witness horrifying events involving gore and bloodshed during the war—to help the wounded, deliver babies under fire, and wash and bury the bodies of the dead. However, in presenting her as a demanding, unwieldy, and overtly aggressive and quarrelsome woman in the company of men in battlefield—where she presents herself as a rival and not a member of an inferior sex—the narrator creates a rather unsympathetic character, as her iron-fisted personality is hard to identify with. Her role in war very much resembles Zahra in *Da, One Woman's War* by Zahra Hosseini, in which the author recounts her memories in the occupied territories in the south. Zahra also performs the same tasks as Hania, they both take up arms and fight, but Zahra has an emotional, more humanistic and humble side to her, whereas Hania appears unmoved by most of the traumatic events she witnesses and spends much of her time quarreling with Alijan and other male characters. Before Alijan's death, the only significant traumatic event that deeply affects her is watching her close friend get shot in the head by a sniper while she sits by her side, in the back of a car which Alijan is driving. The imagery of the detailed descriptions of snow melting from the blood streaming out of Solmaz's head, nose and mouth, and the continuation of her last words she was speaking, even after death has interrupted the conversation is heart-wrenching. Hania's reaction to this event comes in the form of a continuous angry tantrum directed at Alijan, who captures the sniper, but, against Hania's expectations, does not kill him and instead takes him as a prisoner to their base. Caused by her shock at the sight of violence, her wrecking fury spills through her ramblings, and Hania is temporally sent to a hospital, from where she returns resilient as ever.

All the women in the novel are represented as possessing stereotypically masculine traits. They are even viewed as more robust and courageous than the men of the war, like mythical legends of an epic battle. Alijan's mother, Nana, who comes to the war zone to ask for Hania's hand in marriage to her son, stays and helps out with the wounded and women in labor. Hania's friend Jilla, who marries Ibrahim, another historical commander of war and a friend to Alijan, resembles the figures in iconic stereotypical paintings of resistance at the early stages of war (similar to those of Naser Palangi's *Women of the South*). She feels embarrassed and guilty that, while Ibrahim's men get wounded or die, he himself survives the battles. Even when she hears about Ibrahim's brutal death she doesn't properly mourn, she watches as his comrades perform the tradition of singing the war rhythms and beating their chests to convey the message of Ibrahim's death to her. Later she continues to beat her chest in silence and solitude and mourns her husband without a single word or a single tear.

For Jilla, the battlefield becomes a space of spiritual uplifting, a place that men and women join to leave the material world behind and experience the ecstasy of sacrifice for a great cause, to be enraged by the sight of innocent men, women, and children who die a brutal death, to be cleansed of their sins through the hardship of war, and as Alijan liked to say, to "fly" into their death. Just as the narrator felt the ecstasy of adventure escaping the bullets while riding a motorcycle, Jilla is overwhelmed by the intensity of the experience of war which, as La Capra mentions, becomes a source of "sublimity" and "elation":

There is also a tendency to convert trauma into the occasion for sublimity, to transvalue it into a test of the self or the group and an entry into extraordinary. In the sublime, the excess of trauma becomes an uncanny source of elation or ecstasy. Even extremely negative or destructive events may become occasions of negative sublimity or displaced sacralization. They may also give rise to what may be termed founding traumas—traumas that paradoxically become the valorized or intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity. (La Capra 23)

In the end, the protagonists of *Sparrows* become stereotypical heroes of the Iran-Iraq war, despite their tainted pasts and at times unlikable characteristics. The personalities of the fighters are mostly transformed through the experience of war as they become absorbed by it. The novel avoids accessing the internal experience of its characters. The reader gets to know them and their histories through the lens of Danial the journalist.

Even in the most straightforward narrative, that of Hania's memory, the traditional plot and sequence of events are disturbingly chaotic and fragmented. Hania's account of a woman named Safiyeh going into unexpected labor after she accidentally comes upon the execution of a few people at the hands of local ordinary citizens, including her husband, is perhaps the single most captivating narrative of this novel. Amidst the chaos and the fear of the enemy going door to door in the streets, Hania and Nana, Alijan's mother, remove Safiyeh from the scene of execution to her home and help her give birth. In recounting Safiyeh's childbirth amidst the fire and fear of being murdered by occupying forces, Alijan's birth in the water is remembered as is the birth of Hania's and Alijan's daughter, six years into the future, a daughter born just as the news that Alijan has been killed is dimly heard from the radio. By the end of this account of Hania's experiences in love and war, the reader for the very first time—in a space of a single sentence, and only if s/he reads with caution and curiosity—comes to a vague understanding that Hania has lost both legs in the war. As a survivor, Hania's memories, even when recorded in front of the camera and confessed to a journalist, resist a teleological and fetishistic closure. Despite her depiction as an uncompromising woman, the nature of Hania's narrative of the eventual martyrdom of her husband defies a coherent linear sequence of events. Though the lives of lost ones should be remembered and celebrated, the stories they tell and the images they leave behind of their death resist images of a peaceful metamorphosis into the most simplified

symbolic representation of death—here there is no beautiful dove, graciously flying to the heavens with light shining upon the scene.

In the novel, despite its overall resistance to mystical and discriminatory interpretations of events, the novel also registers oppositional forces that appear and try to control the storyline. Ironically, no matter how hard Danial the narrator tries to prevent the author, Bani Ameri, from determining the destiny of his characters, he shows up at Danial's house and forces him to listen to what he has to say, trying to convince him that he too is the creation of the author's imagination. In the final chapter when the author finally takes control of the narrative and completes the missing pieces of the puzzle, the reader realizes that Alijan's father, who everybody up to that moment thinks is dead, is actually alive, and that he is a psychotic figure, a man who married seven women and left each of them after making them pregnant (alluding to the seven chapters, seven thrones, and seven historical, all-too-human characters). We learn that Alijan was in search of his six half-brothers and stepmothers before he became an experienced and devoted fighter. He went to Paveh in the first place to find Jinoo and his half-brother Ali Ashraf. Later he finds another half-brother, Hassoon, in the occupied south. Safiyeh, who they help to give birth in the chaos of occupation and whose husband Noman is a traitor and accomplice to the Iraqi invaders, is Alijan and Hassoon's aunt. The person who impersonates Alijan's voice in the phone calls to Alijan's loved ones turns out to be his twin brother, a man who is dealing with psychological problems passed on from his father who was himself mistreated by his mother. He hates Alijan, the hero of the war, because he gets all the love, fame, and respect, even though he was just an ordinary person. To take away this sense of holiness from Alijan, Bani Ameri makes the reader suspicious of Alijan's transparency of motives by revealing a longtime secret, discovered from under the ruins of a very complex and muddled



narrative, over the course of the whole novel. It turns out that in his youth Alijan made a gypsy girl pregnant and had a daughter with this girl, and that the baby was given to a childless couple after she was born. Though some uncertainty is intentionally created in the novel regarding whether or not this story is actually true, it has the effect of proving that despite his heroism in fighting a war, Alijan is in the end as human as the rest. Years later, and now a grown-up woman, the girl returns to attend the funeral of Alijan and she is observed by many to look just like him.

At this point in the novel, all the realist depictions within the story abruptly shift toward a surrealist non-resolution at the end. The mysteries of the anonymous voice, the family background of Alijan and his twin brother Alishah, and the story of the protagonist's death in war are conveyed to the reader in the final chapter through a glass of water. The author tells the narrator to look into his glass of drinking water, and it is in that moment that Danial sees the truth. At this point, the narrative which has been focused on illuminating external reality throughout the novel by stitching together pieces of documentary film, photography, and personal interviews takes a surrealist turn. The incomprehensible nature of the violence and the secret lives of all the characters are at odds with the author's realistic depictions of external reality and his efforts at documenting the historical truth. Though the facts about Alijan's father, including his mistreatment by his own parents which leads him to abandon his wives and children, could have been narrated within a realist narrative, the surrealist depiction of these truths now comes to represent more than just the facts themselves. This mixture of realism and surrealism is part of the author's wish "to disrupt the fetishized separation of the everyday and the extreme, the individual and history, then and now" (Rothberg 145). The exclusive use of documentary footage, interviews, or photography to represent events becomes problematized in order to acknowledge the impossibility of relying on realism alone – including historical

empiricism – to construct the traumatic history. The surrealist imagery at the end of the narrator’s accounts of history reveals the impossibility of representing traumatic life events through realism alone. There is so much more that what meets the eyes: untold secret personal stories that are not recordable by the lens of a camera have the power to change the meaning of history.

### تابلوی دوم: رنگین کمان

#### THE SECOND PANEL: The Rainbow

While the first panel contains the novel and its seven color coded chapters, the second panel contains only a page and a half transcribing the ambiguous words of the unknown speaker of the first panel.<sup>70</sup> The title of the first panel, (Ghows va Ghozah) غوص و قزح , to the lay reader sounds the same as the second panel, قوس و قزح (Ghows va Ghozah), but the pronunciation and pun of the words suggests different meanings. The word غوص in the first panel means diving and plunging in the water, which explains the content of the first panel: the story of Alijan’s death in the river and his half-brother’s search for his body as a post-traumatic response. The title of the second panel, قوس و غزح refers to the arch of a rainbow. In this short section the ambiguity of the voice of the very first speaker in the novel continues and his previous insistence that he will return to tell the truth comes full circle. He does return, yet he leaves the ambiguity unresolved. He is neither the author nor the narrator, but instead gives the impression of being Alijan himself, whose scar from the wound on his throat still hurts when he drinks water. Yet the speaker now insists that the one who got shot and was drowned by Ali Ashraf and Ali Gol on the

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<sup>70</sup> This analysis is based on the second revision of the novel by the author, in which the very last segment has been added to the novel.

night of the operation was Alishah, the twin brother of Alijan. While growing up, he claims, they would switch roles on many occasions to help each other out. Thus, in Panel Two, all the photojournalist narrator's attempts to reconstruct the history of the warrior out of the chaos of war and traumatic events are undone. In the very closing lines, the ambiguous voice continues to complete the sentences that began the novel but remained unfinished with ellipsis:

It is only I who speak, and write, and it doesn't matter from whose point of view or with what name. The important thing is that I am the only chief narrator who completes the story. And one day, I will come and tell all the truth. [...] How Alishah got shot so I could live to tell all that happened to them and – in fact – to me, was the only way to get rid of the torment I was enduring and, I still do, and to eternity, I think this torment will never leave me. This knowledge is like the knowledge of the torment everybody else is enduring without saying a word about it. Ali Ashraf and Ali Gol found out the truth about me before anybody else. Their peculiar manner is not because of this knowledge. It is because the pain of this unforgivable sin that each of them thinks he has committed alone. Everything happened in that night and in that sudden moment only in one hundredth of a second. (Bani Ameri 439-40)

As in many narratives of war, including but not limited to that of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* or Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (in which the surviving soldiers despair and are defeated at hands of their traumatic memories, Septimus by committing suicide and Keen by vanishing, having left his story unfinished due to his guilt about a crime of murder), a tormenting guilt continues to live within survivors. By the end of *Sparrow*, the identity, name, and fame of the heroic fighter has become a mystery. The binaries of committed vs. corrupt individuals and of sacred vs. de-sanctified death are challenged and the survivors continue with their incomprehension towards the brutalities they have witnessed and the crimes they have committed, just as life goes on regardless of the memories they carry out from that experience into their everyday lives.

Bani Ameri's ultimate refuge in surrealist narrative also blurs the lines of reality and fiction, realism and modernism, and resists the conventional culture of heroism that surrounds the image of a martyr. This non-resolution resonates with Johan Halaka's representation of the culture of martyrdom, discussed in the first chapter, which raised questions in viewers' minds

about their own psychological and political relationship to the images of martyrs glorified in public monuments and prompted reflection on “the benign acceptance of a mythology of martyrdom, created through the institutional promotion of personal sacrifice and collective suffering” (Artist Statement). Similarly, in *Sparrows*, all the certainty about the meaning of events, the religious and mystical interpretation of the sacrificial death of specific characters as told in official narratives of war, suddenly stands on shaky ground, entangled in the question of the identity of the final speaker. The voice that claims to be Alijan in this final scene insists that he is still alive, even as he points to the lingering pain from the scar on his throat and is a witness to the forgetfulness of his loved ones who want him dead and gone.

The novelist’s attempt to identify a legitimate storyteller is in the end designed to fail, confirming that only those who cannot speak have the most reliable stories to tell and that with the impossibility of telling comes the impossibility of closure. Tim O’Brien, a soldier and survivor of the Vietnam war, speaks to these impossibilities in his essay, “How to Tell a True War Story.” He writes, “You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever” (O’Brien 76) and “In many cases a true war story cannot be believed. If you believe it, be skeptical. It’s a question of credibility [...] In other cases, you can’t even tell a true war story. Sometimes it’s just beyond telling” (O’Brien 71). Bani Ameri’s hybrid use of styles and techniques confirms this difficulty. Though he uses film and photographic memory as tools for constructing a historical reality, ultimately the incomprehensibility of the traumatic events and the multidimensionality of its meaning are confirmed by the surreal and ambiguous final scene related through the words of those who have experienced war’s brutality. Working through mythical, historical and empirical, and subjective and individual narratives, the photographs and films in the novel offer a means to convince others of the reality of the events recalled. Yet their

imaginary quality and lack of any actual physical existence, together with the tone used to narrate those scenes, ultimately confirm that what we think of as objective reality always carries a subjective element. As Hayden White has suggested,

there is so much of photo and video documentation of post-modern “accidents” and events that it is difficult to work up the documentation of any one of them as elements of a single “objective” story. Moreover, in many instances, the documentation of such events is so manipulable as to discourage the effort to drive explanations of the occurrences of which the documentation is supposed to be recorded image. (White, In Sobchack 23)

What Bani Ameri succeeds in illustrating so well in his novel is that the types of images that remain in the memory of survivors and witnesses cannot be recorded by any tools of documentary, influenced or controlled by historical archives, or interpreted by anyone who does not possess those memories. They vastly differ from actual physical records that can be construed by different people and groups according to their motivations. The impossibility of creating a linear, realist story is emphasized by the surrealist ending and contradictory voices of the narrator/author/protagonist each claiming to know the truth. The chaotic fragmentation of historical and personal narrative in *Sparrows*, as Caruth observes in her analysis of Claude Lanzmann’s Holocaust documentary *Shoah*, “challeng[es] our usual expectations of what it means to tell, to listen, and to gain access to the past” (154). In Bani Ameri’s novel, once named individuals become unnamed, unidentifiable, ghostlike figures who are enraged by what has happened to them and many others like them; they return without a name or face to bear witness to the brutal nature of their experience. The ambiguity of the identity of the dead soldier and the survivor at the end of the novel becomes a means of resisting the sacralization of a one-dimensional hero. In these cases, trauma “does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned” (Caruth 151). It tells of the existing and everlasting guilt on the consciousness of those survivors that will open up like a

fresh wound in perpetuity to evoke a difficult truth. Traumatic truth is a kind of truth that can never be narrated in a straightforward manner and no one can claim to have known its affective reality through factual evidence alone. When Alijan or Alishah's body is found intact after years in the water, news anchors come from around the world to see the body. The intactness of the returned body is not an allusion to a miracle, but the dead's attempt to speak for himself, the reopening of a deep wound inflicted by the loss of a loved one, and the torment of perpetual guilt that remains for the survivor. The fear of the "sacrilege of the traumatic experience" that Caruth expresses with regards to the reintegration of memory into narrative is put to rest by the ambivalence of the closing lines of *Sparrows*. The certainty about the claim to truth is jolted out of place. The simplistic teleological and theological resolution and closure is, in the end, denied. This impossibility is conveyed in *Sparrows* through the voice that, at the end of the novel, still insists on its return to reveal the truth that only he knows and understands. The nature of pain, however, is a truth that even the sufferer can only imprecisely tell.

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## CHAPTER 3

### TRAUMA'S RESISTANCE TO NARRATIVE

To have pain is to have certainty, to hear about pain is to have doubt.

Elaine Scarry (*The Body in Pain* 13)

That's what fiction is for. It's for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth.

Tim O'Brien (*Writing Vietnam* 3)

#### **Claims of Physical and Psychological Suffering**

In her seminal work *The Body in Pain, The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry writes:

Physical pain has no voice. Yet, when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story. The story that this pain tells is about the inseparability of three concentric circles, the outermost circle describes the difficulty of expressing physical pain, the second describes the political complications that arise from this difficulty, and the third, the nature of both material and verbal expressibility or the nature of human creation. (3)

Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth suggests that this “wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event...” The wound of the mind, having been experienced “too soon,” and “too unexpectedly” repeats itself continually in the life and actions of survivors trying to speak of a “reality or truth that is not otherwise available (Caruth 4-5).

The referentiality of the traumatic wound to something that is situated in the past, not present, belonging to non-immediate experience yet deeply engraved in the mind, memory, and life of a survivor makes a claim about the nature of traumatic experience and its resistance to language. Fictional stories of traumatic experience can be seen as human creations that persist

“in bearing witness to some forgotten wound” and these stories, not limited to but especially about war, have political ramifications.

In this chapter, these arguments on the inexpressibility of pain are analyzed in my discussion of the process of materializing the invisible interior states of the human experience depicted in the fictional world of *Crystal Garden*. This novel, written by the acclaimed Iranian director, writer, and producer Mohsen Makhmalbaf,<sup>71</sup> demonstrates with specific literary techniques and metaphors the difficulty of expressing both physical and psychological pain in language and their intense interconnectedness. In order to express this difficulty, the author literally “unmakes” and deconstructs the hidden interior world of characters affected by events of war and revolution and “re-makes” or reconstructs their lives into a visible and materialized world through his psychoanalytic investigation into his fictional characters. In doing so, he not only visualizes their inner states but also resists any grand redemptory conclusions and ideological closures regarding the experiences of pain and suffering. Makhmalbaf addresses the narrative of traumatic shock not only situated in the events of the past, as event-based models of trauma theory suggest, but even more so in the ongoing experience of suffering in the present that affects and carries on into the future. He acknowledges the incomprehensibility of physical pain, the wordless, excruciating pain of the loss of loved ones exacerbated by the economic status of his representative characters, and the difficulty of communicating these experiences in language. He exemplifies the “speechless terror” and loss of cognition and comprehension at the moment of traumatic despair and its perpetual effects on the lives of affected individuals through

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<sup>71</sup> One of the most famous Iranian filmmakers, Makhmalbaf has made more than 20 feature films and written several novels. Time Magazine has listed his *Journey to Kandahar* (2001) among the top 100 films in the history of world cinema.

an omniscient narrator who relates the stories of many of the individuals residing within the overcrowded and suffocating closed walls of a confiscated house.

The difficulty of expressing physical pain, Scarry suggests, can be apprehended by noticing the exceptional character of pain when compared to any other of our interior states. All interior states of consciousness are accompanied by external objects. We do not simply “have feelings” but have feelings for somebody or something:

If one were to move through all the emotional, perceptual, and somatic states that can take an object – hatred for, seeing of, being hungry for – the list would become a very long one [...] this list and its implicit affirmation would, however, be suddenly interrupted when, moving through the human interior, one at last reached physical pain, for physical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language. (Scarry 5)

Pain, as Scarry asserts, not only resists language it “actively destroys it” (4). Its resistance to objectification leaves persons in pain deprived of the resources of speech, leaving their experience unsharable, their world an “invisible geography”, and the cries of pain like “intergalactic screams” for those who hear about them. Pain that occurs in other people’s bodies “flicker before the mind, then disappear” making this “absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other person” (Scarry 3). Pain’s resistance to language, Scarry goes on to argue, makes it “so flatly invisible, that the problem goes beyond the possibility that almost all other phenomenon occupying the same environment will distract attention from it” (12). This means that one can be in excruciating pain while people close by continue with conversations or activities without being able to feel that pain. The most extreme form of this inability to feel the other’s pain can be seen in the case of torture and war, where someone engages in inflicting pain on another’s body but remains distant from it. For the pain to become visible its “felt-attributes” have to be lifted into “the visible world”. What is crucial in this observation is that, if the referent for these “felt-attributes” of pain is objectified, i.e. if it

refers back to the human body, the “sentient fact of the person’s suffering will become knowable to a second person” (Scarry 13). However, it is also possible, Scarry suggests, that those felt-attributes refer to something other than the body itself, something non-material, un-real, or uncertain.

As is the case in many examples of wars throughout history, when a society faces such a violent crisis the attributes of ‘the suffering body’ severed from the body itself are translated in ways that make visible, lift up, and solidify the authority’s legitimacy for waging war. This process of ‘lifting up’ the interior states of being into the visible world either in verbal or material artifacts is what Scarry calls the “making” and “creation” of the body in pain. Pain, now lifted from the interior state to the external world by numerous sensory verifications and tangible objectifications refers back to the body in pain; a circular motion through which the suffering subject becomes the center of attention. Scarry uses this analogy, as I do, in order to confirm the ways in which “others” become visible or cease to be visible to us through material and verbal artifacts (22).

### **The Novel**

*Crystal Garden (Bâq-e Bolur)* is a plotless novel set within the narrow space of a confiscated house cramped with people.<sup>72</sup> It starts with the pain, apprehension, and trepidation of its mostly female characters and ends with their hopelessness and despair. What happens in the space between is a detailed depiction of the effects of the madness of revolution and war

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<sup>72</sup> Hamid Dabbashi, professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature, Columbia University, is a cultural critic and historian who has written extensively about Makhmalbaf’s life and work. See Dabbashi, Hamid. *Makhmalbaf at Large: The Making of a Rebel Filmmaker*. London, I.B. Tauris, 2008. See also, Dabbashi, Hamid. *Close up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future*. Verso, 2001.

experienced by each individual in their own unique way.<sup>73</sup> The third-person narrative of the novel alternates between the lives of four families all living around the rooms of the servants' residence in the house of a wealthy family who has escaped the country in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. What these characters all share and what has brought them all together is the loss of a loved one in war, their poor social and economic standing, and a room in this shared house. The house, typically happened to the possessions of those who fled after the revolution, is confiscated by the revolutionary government and given to the families of those whose lives had fallen apart in the course of the revolution and the war. The first family consists of Khorshid and her husband Qorban Ali, who had been the servants of the owners of the confiscated house before the revolution and now continue to live there. Khorshid has spent her life in temporary marriages to different men and now lives with her drug addict husband and takes care of the house for its original owner. The second family involves Layeh, wife of a martyr of the Iran-Iraq war, who is about to give birth to her third child at the opening of the novel. The third family is comprised of Mashhadi, a traditional pious man and his wife Aliyeh. Their son Akbar has died in the war and his widow, their daughter-in-law Souri and her two children Samira and Salman now live with them. Mashhadi and Aliyeh's second son Ahmad, the younger brother of the martyr Akbar, is still involved in the fighting and comes home when on leave. The fourth family is that of the young woman Maliheh and her husband Hamid who was shot and injured in war and is now paralyzed from the waist down. Maliheh married Hamid after his paralysis out of her

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<sup>73</sup> The novel has been widely read and critics agree that Makhmalbaf's central focus is women's negative and passive social status in the year following the revolution and war. See Shishehgaran, Parviz. *Chehel Ketab [Forty Books: Descriptive introduction to forty stories of sacred defense]*. Golgasht Pub. 2008.

religious and moral conviction to care for and devote her life to a hero who sacrificed his life in war.

In *Crystal Garden*, Makhmalbaf publicizes and historicizes the suffering of his socially marginalized characters, especially the women. The majority of the novel's protagonists are female, and the story is concerned with their perished families who during the war went generally unnoticed and afterwards were more or less forgotten. These ordinary stories of ordinary people describe the pain, shame, humiliation, loneliness and madness of war that women experience after they lose their men. By focusing on the plight of women as widows and mothers who suffer the devastating effects of war and revolution, *Crystal Garden* is among the rare works to emerge from the revolutionary period, one that fictionalizes, five years into the war, the long-term physical and psychological, deeply internalized, and intensely individualized consequences of trauma that are, at the same time, indicative of socially and politically perpetuated wounds. This novel, together with Makhmalbaf's film, *Marriage of the Blessed*, draw a drastically different image of war from those in the Sacred Defense genre, exemplified in its paintings of revolution and war.

*Crystal Garden* is dedicated "To woman, the oppressed of this land." And with no hesitation in building up the plot, the narrator grabs and yanks the reader into the world of a pain that only a woman can experience and know. The very first opening statement sets the stage for a painstaking struggle of a woman about to give birth: "Layeh was familiar with labor pains; this wasn't her first time". The novel begins with a detailed description of the excruciating pain of childbirth. Layeh's third child is conceived before her husband Mansoor joined and was killed in war. Now Layeh, wife of a martyr<sup>74</sup>, who has two very young children, is about to give birth to

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<sup>74</sup> The use of the word "martyr" in this chapter is a direct reference to what Makhmalbaf uses in the novel.

an already orphaned baby, Setareh. The narrator struggles – literally wrestling with words and language – to convey the difficulty of finding expression for a pain that is both physical and psychological, the pain of giving birth to a child whose father has just died in war. Makhmalbaf saturates this chapter with the physical pain of childbirth, coupled with the psychological pain of the loneliness and fear of raising children unaided in poverty. His description of Layeh’s pain and distress is so painstaking and meticulous that it seems the narrator himself is going through the childbirth, trying to give expression to an inexpressible experience:

Layeh felt feverish. It was so hot! Now her soul was burning in the oven of her body. She is delirious. She raves. She talks nonsense. She utters irrational words...The unwelcome pain was back again, more savage than before. This time it was trying to split her spine as if her spine was a superfluous pillar in her back.<sup>75</sup> (Makhmalbaf Web)

It is not Layeh who characterizes her own experience, but the male narrator who speaks on behalf of the person in pain, attempting to materialize the interior state of the female body in pain during childbirth. Descriptive adjectives like “feverish”, “hot”, and “burning” in the “oven” give a thermal dimension to the content of Layeh’s pain as it “splits” her spine. The splitting quality of this “unwelcome” pain that is “back again” more “savage” in time gives the unseen pain a special, temporal, affective, and evaluative dimension. The description makes visible the interior state of Layeh in pain, though no one else is able to feel, see, or hear the way pain subjects the character to its brutality. This struggle to find words takes up the whole first chapter of the novel, as if the narrator is giving birth not only to Layeh’s baby but to his own language of pain, a language deconstructed and reduced to its most elemental features by the solitary

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<sup>75</sup> Scarry comments on this problematic bounding of language and pain in her discussion of the invention of a diagnostic tool that enables patients to articulate the individual character of their pain. The “McGill Pain Questionnaire” invented by Ronald Melzack and Torgerson in 1971 added a new dimension to felt attributes of pain. The Questionnaire consists primarily of three major classes of word descriptors--sensory, affective and evaluative--that are used by patients to specify subjective pain experience and to give more visibility to interior feelings of patients.

experience of pain. Even though the narrator of the story is an omniscient third-person male, his intrusive attempt in speaking on behalf of a female body makes visible, to some extent through the verbal creation of the author, the internalized and inexpressible felt and tangible reality of pain.

She had once caught her hand in the wheel of a cart [...] No, this was different. Now she was trying to escape from her own self. She was being crushed by her own force. A part of her ran away from the pain. The pain due to multiplying. The pain caused by the separation of two souls from a single body. Separation. Separation from one's own self. Everytime Layeh gave birth, she multiplied herself. Her body shattering into pieces remained an undivided whole. (Makhmalbaf web)

The savagery of the physical pain of childbirth does not only operate on the language of the character, who remains quiet throughout. It disintegrates the meaning of the self in its relation to her being, shattering it in pieces while the body remains whole to the observer. Being crushed by her own force is reminiscent of the self-destructive force of physical pain felt by the civilian woman affected by chemical poisoning, referenced in a previous chapter who expresses herself in what seems closest to her experience of pain in a single statement, "I want to die." Here too, the pain deconstructs Layeh's female subjectivity, her agency, "unmaking" her world and causing a separation from her own self.

Was she paying for some dreadful sin she had committed? What was she guilty of? Of being a woman. The pleasure of being a female, a wife, a mother. The sentence: excruciating labour pains. All the pleasures of the universe were now dirt in her eyes. All maternal love vacated her heart. Now pain made her grind her teeth. She was swelling up inside. A corpse was being blown up [...] "Oh, God, where is your death? (Makhmalbaf 17)

This brutal reality of the inexpressibility of pain is what makes the sufferer turn to these existential questions. Layeh does not say much about the pain itself (including to her children who watch her suffer) except to suggest that death itself would be easier and more meaningful than the pain of childbirth. Layeh's thoughts and objectification of her inner turmoil seem born out of her crucial wordless painful experience, as Scarry notes, "As the content of one's world



disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates: as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project is robbed of its source and its subject" (35). For Layeh, there is nothing left of motherly affections; the very notion of her gender, her female subjectivity, is called into question. World, self, and voice are lost and emptied of meaning. The pleasures of motherly love are converted into gruesome feelings, "Pain can reorder priorities in a hurry. It can show us what truly matters" (Morris 45).

In an astonishing move, Makhmalbaf takes the impossibility of articulating pain to another level. The pain of childbirth does not awaken the desire for the abstract promise of paradise believed to be a mother's reward. Makhmalbaf takes his subversive art to the extreme by comparing the twists and turns of Layeh's physical labor with that of an animal giving birth:

Layeh, hands on waist, walked the length of her room. Pain. Pain. An ewe giving birth. The girls stood by worried. An ewe was in labour. It wasn't right to interfere with the miracle of life. An ewe in a flock yet giving birth alone. She had to suffer and bear it alone. Pain. Pain. Then a moment's relief. Time to graze and forget the pain. Then pain again. More intense than before. Muscles contracting. Feeling weak in the legs. The sheep lies on its back. The sickness and helplessness of the ewe. Layeh is in such pain that she lies on her back. And when pain reaches its height, another lamb is born: "Now you are in this world, it's all yours! Be happy! But only for a short while, decapitation is not far off. Graze and become fat!" Humans and beasts suffer pain alike. Both give birth in the same manner. (Makhmalbaf web)

Drawing parallels between the human condition and an animal is an affirmation of the limits of representation, a limitation that defies any idealization and romantic celebration of motherhood, motherly sacrifice, or any other ideological imposition of meaning on suffering, especially in such inhuman conditions. It affirms the total defiance of the human subject in the clutches of pain, and the meaninglessness of having to go through such indescribable torture. Layeh is watched by her two young children as she lies down to become her own midwife. It is through the repetition of the word "pain" itself, over and over again, that the narrator delivers the intensity and the defiance of language in describing its reality.

Referring to the history of the Holocaust, in “Regarding the Pain of Women: Questions of Gender and the Arts of Holocaust Memory,” James Young states that men and women who were subject to “starvation,” “separation,” and “deportation” were able to share stories of suffering in the hands of the Nazis, but what they didn’t share were the stories of “sexual exploitation, of religious modesty...of rape, of childbirth, or of abortions,” which had no place in traditional histories of the Holocaust (1778). He poses an intriguing question: “do we actually ever see the pain of women, or do we see only our own reflections in the shiny veneer of women as symbols – of resistance, of innocence, of regeneration?” Young believes that the stories of women’s helplessness and physical torment are often “masked by icons of resistance” (1779). Just as in the works of visual artists of the revolution and Sacred Defense projecting their male point of view, these artists saw their own desired stereotyped image of a woman in symbolizing resistance and regeneration in the feminine body which corroborated their values regarding the domestic sphere and a conservative patriarchal society. Despite the fact that Makhmalbaf, as a male narrator, is not the most natural or obvious narrator of the female experience, he provides an alternative representation to that ideal image. In his unconventional and unorthodox comparison between birth-giving women and birth-giving animals, Makhmalbaf leaves no space for such idealization of women as icons of resistance, heroism, or cradles of martyrdom.

The pain of childbirth is believed by most religious doctrines to be rewarded with a heavenly prize by God, or as Islamic Hadith withholds, heaven is mothers’ inheritance. Certain traditions have it that if the mother dies while giving birth she is considered a martyr. Layeh’s detailed story of her childbirth and her attitude toward her children and toward her own pain in the opening chapter of *Crystal Garden* completely dismantles the social, cultural, and religious expectations regarding womanhood. Makhmalbaf, who himself was a child conceived during a

marriage that only lasted six days, was raised by his grandmother in a lower-class family where he learned to sympathize with women and feel the reality of their difficult lives in a very conservative and patriarchal society. In his work, he resists the patriarchal tendency to assign symbolic significance to the female experience by narrating their suppressed distress from a male point of view. Makhmalbaf's description of Layeh's childbirth not only addresses the loneliness of these widowed women among their so-called flock of fellow citizens, but also the dilemma of the second generation of children born into such misery by foreshadowing the fact that their "decapitation is not far off". By the very first chapter, Makhmalbaf has already juxtaposed the complex relations of stories of pain with that of political and social conventions. In his interpretation, the tensions of physical pain and the limits of language already accompanied by psychological pressures intensify the debilitating nature of both the physical and material upset caused by these conventions and the contradictory nature of the reality of an individual experience with that of an institutionalized symbolization of traumatic experience.

"There is no piece of literature that is not about suffering," Scarry asserts, "Let one experience the physical pain and all the emotional and psychological pain will be forgotten on the spot" (11). Basing her claim on the notions of objectification and reference to an external and material reality outside the self, Scarry is convinced that psychological suffering always finds its way into language. She employs Virginia Woolf's famous quote on this subject as evidence for incomparable level of difficulties in expressing psychological and physical trauma.

English, which can express the thoughts of Hamlet and the tragedy of Lear, has no words for the shiver and the headache. It has all grown one way. The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her; but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other. (qt. Scarry 4)

Theorists of trauma and psychological suffering have tended to agree that trauma, meaning “wound” in Greek, and in the modern psychological sense “an extremely distressing or emotionally disturbing event,” is “unspeakable”, “indescribable” “inexpressible”, and “unrepresentable”. Just like physical pain, they claim, traumatic memory resists language, it “crosses limits, and disrupts boundaries,” and this characteristic of excess produces disorientation, escapes understanding, and resists representation (Nadal and Calvo 2). In Makhmalbaf’s depiction of Layeh’s agonizing experience of childbirth, the deconstructive force of pain is not only caused by physical pain. Her bodily suffering is accompanied and made worse by the psychological and cognitive disorientation described through Layeh’s verbalization of nonsense and irrational words. Twisted with the pain of labor, the interference of her emotions pose more of a threat than her physical state, as the narrator’s reflections later in the novel indicate.

Layeh wrapped herself in her chador and went out into the garden. Who could guess what wounds were hidden under that veil? Did she herself know what pain Souri might hide under hers? Or the broken heart Mashadi had under his dark shirt? There was no way Layeh and the others could communicate with each other. Perhaps only a sigh now and then betrayed what went on in their hearts. Perhaps their own feelings were a clue to what the others might be feeling. (Makhmalbaf web)

The “wounds” that are “hidden under that veil” refer not to physical but to psychological injuries, wounds that remain veiled, unspoken, and inexpressible, incomparable to any sensory feeling. In fact, traumatic suffering and wounded memory often become accessible via somatic symptoms. The excruciating pain of the body becomes the vehicle to drive the real pain of the memory home, the unbearable pain of loss and fear of loneliness. Had it not been for the circumstances under which Layeh lived – the loss of masculine support in a patriarchal society, having to live in poverty in a temporary place with three children in a single room of a confiscated house, the lack of social support under the glooming shadow of war, and the fear of an unknown destiny – would she have even felt the pain of labor as described? Would she have

given birth like an animal? Would she have felt “that she had wanted to raise [her two children] up in the air and throw them with all her might on the floor”? Had Layeh not lost her beloved husband and been forced to live in dire conditions would the narrator have introduced the thought that “with the third one on its way, Layeh had better lie down and die”?

Just as physical trauma becomes visible through different avenues of objectification, psychological trauma negotiates the conflict between the disrupted normalcies of the internal and the terrorizing force of the external world. How is that terror, the disbelief that usually accompanies unexpected or brutal incidents, verbalized? Clinical psychologists argue that people who undergo psychological trauma suffer “speechless terror,” an “experience [that] cannot be organized on a linguistic level and thus becomes not only inaccessible but also unrepresentable” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 172). Contrary to Scarry’s claim that the experience of physical pain supersedes that of emotional distress, Kolk and others have argued that most chronic depression caused by traumatic experience manifests itself in physical symptoms such as “chronic tiredness, weakness, and lack of resistance to illness” and that in a state of total helplessness, both physical and emotional pain stops, and a feeling of “tragic sadness is experienced” (15). Kolk further indicates that in post-traumatic states there is a very high incidence of “attachment to painful feelings as a source of unconscious gratification.” The traumatic experience changes the “hedonistic self-regulatory system” which is made up of both “anatomical and psychological components” (Kolk 15). Judith Herman, a clinical psychologist, has also recognized in trauma a destructive psychic force that is highly resistant to narrativization and tends to disable what she calls “the synthesizing function of the mind” (35).

Caruth suggests that language that addresses psychological crisis is almost always literary, a language “that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (5), a view shared by many

psychologists who have identified a connection between narrative and the experience of PTSD.

Rothschilde, for example, indicates that it is within the somatic descriptions of pain that the hidden pain of the psyche becomes accessible, at least to some extent:

at the core of traumatized and neglected patients' disorganization is the problem that they cannot analyze what is going on when they re-experience the physical sensations of past trauma, but that these sensations just produce intense emotions without being able to modulate them so the task of "therapy", or what I would call narration and interpretation, is to help people "to stay in their bodies and to understand these bodily sensations" (8)

Emotional and psychological trauma create a crypt from which sometimes only a pre-language sign like a "sigh" can reveal its existence: "There was no way Layeh and the others could communicate with each other. Perhaps only a sigh now and then betrayed what went on in their hearts." Even though the women in the confiscated house in *Crystal Garden* have conversations with one another, the degree to which they have been traumatized by the loss of a loved one and how they truly feel about it remain unspoken, and are at the same time the underlying reasons for their intense internal conflicts. As the pain of childbirth mounts, so does the pain of loss swirl in Layeh's memories, producing an intense emotional pain that cannot be simply communicated. "And now where was her husband to enjoy the tomfoolery of his kids? He had left her all his dreams and was gone". The psychic wound remains a secret while the physical finds its way into material manifestations, calling the attention of the neighbors to come to her rescue. While Layeh goes through labor the memories of her youthful happiness and carefree life in her rural village make the unbearable pain even more agonizing. It is well established that the mind and emotions can exaggerate or lessen one's perception of pain (Morris 43). The more she remembers her husband, the more she realizes the eternal loss, and the more she feels the pain of having another child.

The meanings associated with pain are deeply bound up with the historical culture within which they occur to such an extent that an outsider would find them difficult to understand

(Scarry 41). At the same time, there is a “universal sameness” in the central problem of pain, as Scarry suggests, and that is “its resistance to language as essential to what pain really is and not simply of its incidental or accidental attributes” (5). The universality of this problematic relation of pain with language does not deny cultural distinctions in the response to or the expression of pain; while some cultures suppress others tend to express cries of pain. Yet taking all the cultural and language differences, cries of pain “would themselves constitute only a very narrow margin of differences,” many of them translatable to “Ah” with small variations in punctuation (Scarry 5), while indications of a concealed feeling of loss are communicated to the observer through a pre-linguistic sound such as a sigh. The original sounds Makhmalbaf uses as the cries and vocalization of pain in Persian, “vooyyy” and “aaayyy”, are translated to "Oh God! Oh! Oh! God!" in English. “Ah!” “Oh” or “Aaayyy!!” are indicators of the unbearable feeling of “burning,” “splitting,” and “savage” physical pain, while the “sigh” can be an indicator of a pain that has no sensory dimension as such, even though it can be objectified in another human being that is now lost.

In some cases, the “sigh” remains the only pathway to a character’s emotional pain. Such cries or sighs as responses to the psychological trauma of loss can be seen in other literary traditions, confirming a universal sameness. The Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury, in his epic account of the catastrophe of Al-Nakba in 1948 and the subsequent Israeli occupation of Palestine, draws an amazing picture of what it means to lose a loved one and how one hits the barriers of limitations in language when it comes to talking about it. Yunes, a freedom fighter and the protagonist in Khoury’s novel, *Gate of the Sun*, recounts his memories of his beloved wife’s reaction to the loss of their very young and only child. When Nahilah’s first son Ibrahim dies, or as she believes, is killed by Israelis, Khoury weaves the impossibility of expressibility of

the loss of a loved one through Nahila's wordless pre-language sounds and cries. When, in Bab al-Shams, she tries to tell Yunes of their son's death, she cannot say in her words what happened but instead expresses the way she feels: "she said she wanted to die. She said she had died":

Her words blended into her moans. "She wasn't weeping," said Yunes. I didn't hear sobbing or screaming. I heard moaning like that of a wounded animal... She whispered, "Ibrahim." Silence and the madness of sorrow struck me, and I heard a low moaning coming from every pore of her body... She opened her mouth to say something, and a grating, gasping sound emerged, as though she were in her death throes. (Khoury 60)

Language stops functioning in Nahilah's story. Logic falls short of reasoning. Silence, moans, and sounds replace words as the only means of communication. As in Layeh's story of pain when mourning a loss, here again the human subject becomes an animal. Not only the language but the subject herself disintegrates to nothingness where all meaning is lost. A crypt, a burial place inside the self for a loved object, is created by the traumatic experience. This crypt contains secrets and silences. Cryptonyms, or words with disguised meanings, create a pathway to this crypt and the whole process becomes "an attempt at exorcism [...] placing the effects of the phantom in the social realm" (Schwab 54). Khoury's attack on language is a material manifestation of the unbearable experience that resists words, yet can be objectified, even through silence, gasping and grating sounds that refer to an empty void. This fragmented language of sounds and signs traces the irredeemable and interminable experience of trauma to its source, the abysmal void of the psyche, to *how it feels* to be emptied of existence and of meaning, and of language after a traumatic loss and becomes a testimony to the world of personal and individual.

As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, testimony indicates a "crisis of truth":

texts that testify do not simply report facts but, in different ways, encounter—and make us encounter—strangeness; how the concept of testimony, speaking from a stance of superimposition of literature, psychoanalysis and history, is in fact quite unfamiliar and



estranging, and how, the more we look closely at texts, the more they show us that, unwittingly, we do not even know what testimony is and that, in any case, it is not simply what we thought we knew it was. (7)

As opposed to some physical wounds that can be forgotten when the source of pain is healed, psychological wounds in events like, but not limited to, genocide and war – as Felman and Laub suggest, becomes a “history which is essentially not over” (xiv). In cases like those in Khoury’s and Makhmalbaf’s novels, the void that the psychic wound creates in the subject becomes visible in the breakage of language that offers a testimony to an unsayable and perpetual painful experience.

### **Intrusive Memories and Repetition Compulsion: The Case of Veterans with PTSD**

Let's begin with the first clean fact, James: This ain't no war story.

Larry Heinemann, *Paco's Story*

In addition to Layeh and her children, *Crystal Garden* follows the lives of three additional families. Hamid is a veteran suffering from spinal cord injury; his wife Maliheh has married him, based on her religious ideals, to serve someone who has sacrificed his life for a great cause. In addition to portraying Hamid’s difficulties in everyday life due to his physical hardship, the narrator also inserts himself into Hamid’s thoughts. The pain of his physical disability is not the most difficult aspect of Hamid’s life; his inner emotional turmoil has an even greater crippling effect. The paralyzed veteran ponders over the abstract ideology of manhood and the reality of his body half gone: “A real man is the one who loses half of himself on the path toward his manliness. A man half of his body?” (Makhmalbaf 51). From his doubts about the concept of manhood, Hamid immediately shifts to contemplating his wife’s motivation for staying with him – does she really love him, is she sacrificing her youth and dreams to take care

of him? Does she pity him, or is she claiming “the medal of honor” for what she does? All the glory of fighting in battle to achieve human perfection, of sacrificing his legs, his body, and his manhood would lose their meaning if these doubts about his life with Maliheh were realized: he, “[w]ho like a dead-end alley reaches the impasse in himself” could now “hear his bones erode in his body on this wheelchair” (Makhmalbaf 53).

Not only is his body tied to a wheelchair forever eroding, so is his psyche, through the traumatic flashbacks that are triggered daily. As he looks at his photo album, the inanimate figures of his comrades come to life and invite Hamid to their company. The metal tracks of the tank in the photo start to roll, and the sound echoes in his head. He ducks his head as he starts to hear exploding mortars all around him. And then, as if it is happening all over again, he watches his thirteen-year-old comrade Ali being pressed under the tank. Hamid gets shot himself, and so the only thing he can do for his teenage comrade is, with great difficulty, give him some water. The scene of Ali’s brutal death is followed immediately by the boy’s funeral procession, in which his smashed body is carried in a bag like “ground meat” (Makhmalbaf 231). As Hamid remembers the names of his comrades, he articulates his emotional attachment and his moral obligation to name and humanize this human being whom he has just witnessed being transformed into a “thing” like “ground meat”. As soon as Hamid closes the album, he is back again in the present and rolls his wheelchair to the street. A couple is passing by and offers to help push him up the sloping street. He despises the slightest gesture of pity, as it reminds him of his own wife Maliheh and her motivations to stay with a crippled man.

He then sees another handicapped veteran in the same spot, being pushed in his wheelchair by his young wife, a very common scene during the war. The sight of them leads to another bloody flashback and yet another traumatic memory. He recalls another comrade being

shot by a bullet that cuts his throat all the way through like a “butcher’s knife”. He wishes his own wound had gone through his throat instead of his spine, so he wouldn’t be the subject of pity and the object of suffering. Totally lost to the cycle of violence he has witnessed, he makes his way back to the present and starts a conversation with the veteran in the street. Without being a war story, this narrative becomes a war story, as Larry Heinemann ironically suggests in the opening lines of *Paco’s Story*, used as an epigraph to this section: “Let’s begin with the first clean fact, James: This ain’t no war story” (1). Though no longer physically in the war zone, the life of a veteran, nevertheless, remains a war zone, a reminder of a “history which is essentially not over” (Felman and Laub xiv). Like Paco and many other returning soldiers, Hamid is transformed into a crippled outsider, isolated not only physically, but psychologically, as he resides with the widowed women in this temporary house.

Psychologists have diagnosed Hamid’s symptoms as a key aspect of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The many symptoms of PTSD fall into three categories: “hyperarousal,” “intrusion,” and “constriction” (Herman 35). In hyperarousal, victims are constantly expecting danger, intrusion reflects the constant reliving of the traumatic experience, and constriction is the numbing response of surrender. Trauma survivors such as war combatants constantly relive the intrusion of events as if they were recurring in present. The traumatic moment, Herman observes, becomes “encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness” in the form of flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. The most insignificant ordinary and everyday incidents can evoke traumatic memories with the intense emotional force of the original event (Herman 37). PTSD involves, in Caruth’s words, a “wound of the mind”. This “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event

that. . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor (Caruth 5).

The character Hamid is very like Haji, a victim of PTSD portrayed in Makhmalbaf's film *Marriage of the Blessed*; Haji relives the memory of material annihilation with his whole being, lived experience which does not reconcile with the propagandist imagery of institutional martyrdom. In the film, PTSD is used to tie the personal to the social and political circumstances of the time, where the director's message is resolutely political, as compared to *Crystal Garden* which is first and foremost devoted to the internal and personal. Haji, in order to be able to function in post-war society, takes a job in a newspaper agency. He is told by his editor to focus on shortcomings but to "preserve a balanced view." Haji's representation of post-revolution, post-war Tehran begins when he starts photographing for the news agency throughout the city. His camera shutter clicks only on images of poverty, drug addiction, homelessness, and other urban crimes that contrast a promise of utopia with the objectifiable pain of human flesh. The contrast between ideology and reality in these shots is further exacerbated as the camera shifts from a luminous Nuptial Chamber in the foreground, constructed to commemorate unmarried male soldiers killed in the war, to darkly lit and black-and-white shots behind the chambers. Haji shoots with flashbulb lighting effects in absolute darkness to foreground the unresolved situation of the poor visible in gloomy unnoticed corners.<sup>76</sup> The editor censors his work by publishing only a photograph of a sunflower which Haji had taken at the end of his reportage to distract a

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<sup>76</sup> At the height of the Iran-Iraq war, Khomeini, enraged by the gulf between "kukh neshin" (shanty dwellers) and kakh neshin (palace dwellers), declared the year 1983-84 to be "the year of mostazafin," (the oppressed), proposing that true Islam is the Islam of the "suffering indigent, the Islam of the barefoot, the Islam of the scourge of the despised ones, of the bitter and disgraceful history of deprivation, the annihilator of modern capitalism and bloodthirsty communism." (Egan 100)

policeman, explaining that he “can’t solve social problems with a couple of photographs.” The authorities’ definition of a “balanced view” is to mask the bitter truth of their failed promises. Haji’s frustration at being used and betrayed, expressed through his seizures, is repeated at the marriage registry office where two parties secretly offer unequal land deals, an explicit contradiction of the ideals of Islamic laws. Witnessing the corruption of society in this exploitative deal triggers yet another flashback. where the tapping of words on the keys in this office is directly linked to the shooting of rifles, mixing the black-and-white present day with battlefield scenes in color (Egan 109-114). The metaphorically loaded shot highlights the impossibility of integration for soldiers with PTSD into the civil life at home where everything reminds them of their wasted ideals in a brutal war. Hamid’s memories in *Crystal Garden*, on the other hand, are bound to the secluded realm of an overcrowded household of mostly women and children, with only allegorical reference to the social and political: his tool of self-expression is painting with lifeless colors while sitting on his wheelchair. Reliving imagistic memories with non-verbal content, however, is a practice shared by both soldiers and it remains at the heart of post-traumatic experience.

The reliving of traumatic memories is a universal phenomena. Many soldiers have dealt with the return and repetition of their war experiences in their everyday lives. The writer Pat Barker has documented the lives of many World War I soldiers and physicians in her semi-fictional narrative *Regeneration* (1991). In this novel, Barker refers to a treatment method that was evolving during World War I (1914-18) and was used on traumatized soldiers and officers at a military hospital in Scotland by the book’s protagonist, the historical physician, Dr. W.H.R. Rivers. Dr. Rivers helps patients bring memories of traumatic experiences into their conscious minds through dialogue and verbalization of their memories, so they can become free of the

unresolved tensions that are repressed on the level of the unconscious. David Burns is a young officer who is sent to Craiglockhart for treatment. Dr. Rivers tries to help him but has little to no success. Burns is too anxious and strained to speak about his dreadful war experiences; his uncommunicativeness prevents him from discharging his memories and recovering, or rather the intensity of his overwhelming painful memories, experiences that he does not know how to put into words, prevents him from communicating with others. His mental state becomes symptomatic in his physical state. Unable to eat, he is gaunt and emaciated, like a "fossilized schoolboy." Another soldier, Billy Prior, a young working-class man, who was promoted to an officer's rank when he served at the front, also arrives at Craiglockhart after war traumas leave him temporarily mute. The renowned poet Wilfred Owen is treated in the same hospital for the stammer he developed at the front. Siegfried Sassoon describes what Freud termed this "fixation to the trauma" as an "inferno" of an "evil hour" that destroyed the best of men. It is only "now", Sassoon write, in "dislocated speech" and in the "suffocation of nightmare" that the traumatized belatedly starts the process of realization of past events. (qtd. in Herman 23)

The fictional character Hamid's psychological paralysis as a veteran of war and his constant remembrance of the traumatic moments of battlefield, inanimate objects, sounds, and sights trigger the moment of shock that has not been assimilated into normal memory and therefore skips logic and language. Similarly, Robert Graves, another poet of WWI and a friend to Sassoon, describes his fixation on trauma and its intrusion into everyday life as though he were still living in trenches: "I was still mentally and nervously organized for war. Shells used to come bursting on my bed at midnight even though Nancy shared it with me. Strangers in the daytime would assume the faces of friends who have been killed" (qtd. in Herman 35). Trauma memory is not the same as normal memory, as Pierre Janet explains,

[Normal memory] like other psychological phenomena, is an action: essentially it is the action of telling a story... A situation has not been satisfactorily liquidated... until we have achieved, not merely an outward reaction through our movements, but also an inward reaction through the words we address to ourselves, and through the organization of the recital of the event to others and to ourselves, and through the putting of this recital in its place as one of the chapters in our personal history... Strictly speaking, then one who retains a fixed idea of a happening cannot be said to have a “memory”... it is only for convenience that we speak of it as a “traumatic memory.” (qtd. in Herman 35)

Hamid constantly internalizes his trauma episodes which results in his withdrawal and cynical manner toward his wife and others. There is no cohesive, sharable story in the memory of his comrades being grinded up like raw meat or being slaughtered like an animal. These scenes remain as what they really are, brutal images of bare material annihilation of the body, an event that cannot be narrated to others and incorporated into his personal history in a linear and meaningful format. Above all, the fixed image of a slaughterhouse, as realistic as it is, resists symbolic mystification and mythologization. The experience of war has fragmented Hamid’s “normal memory” as well as the linguistic processing of those memories. However, there is a need to tell and to communicate, even though, as the conversation between the two veterans on the street suggests, the incomprehensible physical and psychological experience cannot be described by words. The exchange is rather short, dismal, and amputated like the subjects of the conversation. Ellipses fill the silence, as a gesture to the lack of words; Xs invalidate the recognition and the humanity of the veterans and their integration into the society contrary to the functions of memory that individualizes and personalizes the experience of suffering for its true subject.

Do you remember him? The one who didn’t have a leg?! ... And no arm...? Can you recall? He died. Doctors could not do anything for him. Poor man suffered for three years in bed and on the wheelchair. [...]

.....

And the X too, doctors turned him away.

.....

And X as well ... (Makhmalbaf 234)

As a writer, Makhmalbaf knows the difficulty of imparting suffering in language. Like the stories of trauma victims, his psychoanalytic realist depictions of the anxieties of ordinary people in *Crystal Garden* do not follow a single cohesive plot. Even everyday life is an incomprehensible experience for his characters. If realism's claim is to create a certain "concord between the narrator and the reader" and to represent a "socially shared universe of meaning" (Rothberg 113), what "concord" is there between the ghastly world of these survivors – the real and hellish memory of the past that they relive every day – and the readers of their stories? The conversation between two incapacitated veterans above, which can hardly be called a dialogue, is reminiscent of the disparity between normality and the extremity of suffering. Their silences, gaps, ellipsis, and question marks confirm the need for modes of representation that approximate extraordinary experience. Makhmalbaf seems to understand this as in *Crystal Garden*, he attempts to negate realist norms of objective clarity and description through the dehumanizing effect of naming the victims as Xs who are identifiable only through their amputated bodies. His approach to the narration of the traumatic world to which his characters are bound disrupts rather than upholds the conventional harmony of the reader-narrator relationship.

Unidentified, forgotten, and marginal is the status of many veterans with severe symptoms of PTSD. Makhmalbaf's representation of mentally wounded veterans is as close as a fictional and imaginative narrative can get to the thoughts of a survivor. Yet, even his carefully studied fictional account of their experience can only represent a very few segments of life that come close to the reality of these men. According to the Foundation for Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, there are thousands of psychiatrically wounded veterans of war throughout Iran, and many are severely affected. All of these PTSD patients suffer from sleep disorders and a lack of



concentration and sensation, feelings of despair, lack of life satisfaction, and negative thoughts. The inability of these type of veterans to make progress to resolve these afflictions often lowers their social status. The incessant, repetitive return of an event (or history) that has not integrated itself into narrative memory is experienced through intrusive flashbacks usually accompanied by frequent seizures and episodes of fright, leaving these veterans bereft of a proper method of communication and reducing them to the margins of society. They frequently become homeless, and many become addicted to the opioids and psychiatric drugs that allow them a few hours of relaxation and relief from pain. Many harm themselves or their family members due to their psychological state or die alone and forgotten.<sup>77</sup> In an attempt to approximate the unimaginable conditions of these types of post-traumatic experiences, Makhmalbaf crams as many characters as possible into the enclosed walls of their own individual psyche and the outer layer of the confiscated house making them engage in the internal struggles of a “Concentrationary” universe.

### **The Spacio-Psycho Concentrationary: The Confiscated House and the Claims of Realist and Modernist Narratives**

Each of the four families in *Crystal Garden* inhabits a separate room in the servants’ quarters of the confiscated house. The impending news of the original owners’ homecoming destabilizes the already precarious condition of its residents, who have no permanent home of their own. The house is not simply a setting or structure in which their stories are situated; it highlights the entrapment of each individual in their situation, their internal emotional and psychological breakdown, as well as alluding to a dystopic malfunctioning environment that

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<sup>77</sup> “The Uncensored Life of Psychologically Wounded Veterans.” <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/890774/>

inhabits and projects a socially and economically subjugated group of people. The labyrinth of internal and special limitations imposed on human subjects creates conditions closely analogous to what the French writer, activist, and Nazi concentration camp survivor David Rousset refers to as a “concentrationary universe.”

Rousset’s 1946 book *L’Univers concentrationnaire* is an account of the author’s sixteen-month experience in Nazi concentration camps during World War II.<sup>78</sup> His reflection on his experience, however, did not remain focused and limited on the concentration camps as unique and localized sites of torture. Rousset analyzed and reflected on camps as symptoms of an infectious disease, a gangrene that could spread beyond the confines of Germany into the world, as it did in Gulag.<sup>79</sup> Rousset uses the metaphors of gangrene and contamination to suggest how the camps are a sign of a diseased body politic.

The concentrationary universe is not only the world of the concentration camps; The camps are indicative of a society in which thought is deadened, action is programmed, and there is no vigilant anxiety about or active resistance to the absolute corrosion of human singularity and human rights” (*Concentrationary Memories* 3).

In Griselda Pollock and Max Silvermann’s *The Concentrationary Memories and the Politics of Representation* the concept of the “concentrationary” is adapted into a series of projects that includes the following titular phrases: Concentrationary Memories, Concentrationary Imaginaries; and Concentrationary Art.<sup>80</sup> Without wishing to deflect the

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<sup>78</sup> Returning in 1945 as a survivor of the Neuengamme concentration camp and the Buchenwald Nazi concentration camp, David Rousset (1912–87) wrote a series of articles in the Parisian press that were published as a book in 1946 under the title *L’Univers concentrationnaire*, and then as a novel in 1947 based on his experiences in Buchenwald entitled *Les Jours de notre mort* [The Days of our Death].

<sup>79</sup> Forced-labor camps set up by Vladimir Lenin that reached its peak during Joseph Stalin’s rule from the 1930s to the early 1950s in Soviet Union.

<sup>80</sup> *The Concentrationary Memories* is part of a series titled *New Encounters: Arts, Cultures and Concepts* funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of England. See Pollock, Griselda, and Max Silvermann, *Concentrationary Memories: Totalitarian Terror and Cultural Resistance*. 1st ed., I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2012.

specificity of Holocaust memory, the authors' aim in this series is "to reintroduce the parallel but eclipsed domain of the concentrationary as a prism through which to examine the relations between the politics of total domination with its systematic destruction of the human, and the self-conscious aesthetic practices which identify and resist that persistent threat" (*Concentrationary Memories* xvi). By looking through the prism of concentrationary, I would argue, allows us to consider varying cultural responses, not only to the specific event of the Holocaust but also to the larger situation giving rise to genocide, namely, authoritarian terror as well as the colonial and imperial desire for manipulation and domination. Such a prism can help with what Rothberg suggests, that by employment of "anachronism and anachronism (dis)placements we can bring together the Holocaust, slavery, and colonialism as singular yet relational histories," a form of reading that he calls "multidirectional memory" (Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma Studies" 225). Thus the discussion of concentrationary, as Pollock and Silvermann note, "becomes a conceptual form, in plural, and with no capital letters" with putting the emphasis on the "permanent presence of the concentrationary", since its initiation and in varying global contexts and its extension and appeal beyond World War II into the modern life. The concentrationary, therefore, is a continued threat of "totalitarian mentality into the deepest recesses of everyday popular culture," a disease not restricted to Nazi Germany.<sup>81</sup>

Extending the concept of the concentrationary beyond a localized and temporal event, I read Makhmalbaf's novel and its intentional cramping of its inhabitants into a confiscated house as a sign of his attention to the political dimensions of the concentrationary situation during war

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<sup>81</sup> Pollock and Silvermann also emphasize the distinction between concentration camps and extermination camps that allows us to disentangle the confusion in the representation of the Holocaust. Concentrationary camps were liberated and they included non-Jewish population. While representations have been constructed on the images from these concentration camps, extermination camps were never liberated, and these sites and their procedures are almost without documentation or visual representation. See *Concentrationary Memories: Totalitarian Terror and Cultural Resistance*, edited by Griselda Pollock, and Max Silvermann, I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2012. pp. 5-12.

and revolution, conditions in which all forms of “democratically participatory political and individuated cultural life” are destroyed. In this universe, though small, the concentrationary is not the site of torture or horror, but it “must be recognized as a present potential infectant of any system in which the humanity of the human can be compromised by a logic of both instrumentalization and ‘uselessness’, and in which uniqueness, plurality and spontaneity (Arendt’s defining qualities of the human condition) are not protected” (*Concentrationary Memories* 20) Thus my use of the term is not an attempt to undermine the specificity of an historical catastrophe through overly generalized comparisons, rather it is an indication of my belief that the term can be equally relevant to those who suffer tragedies of war, its physical and psychological consequences, and the limits of its representation.

The “concentrationary” that Makhmalbaf seeks to represent is not only created through his characters’ internal mediations on memories and the post-traumatic stress in their everyday life, but also through the real and tangible structure of a house that contains the misery of its inhabitants. In order to enclose the fragments of his characters’ individual lives and excavate their deepest emotions, the author uses space as a container in which traumatic memory and post-traumatic stress are relived and remembered with enduring continuity. The architecture of these spaces does not simply serve as a metaphor for representing a continual, destructive past or present. The physical places in the novel also have social and psychological significance – they are the material reality that gives shape to the emotional experience of chaos. Physical space makes tangible not only how these characters live individually, internally and psychologically, but also what they experience communally and socially. The confiscation of the property confirms the control that authorities perform over the lives of individuals and the devastating effects of revolutions and wars in displacing populations and claiming the dignity and stability of

their lives. The cramped confiscated house in *Crystal Garden* becomes a “concentrationary universe” that severs its inhabitants from the rest of society and leaves them to dwell on their own problems. The confiscated house represents the “lack of shared meaning”, the rupture between the narrator and the reader, another way in which Makhmalbaf attempts to forestall the normalizing of traumatic suffering.

Within the confines of the confiscated house, Makhmalbaf depicts the most mundane actions of his characters, all of whom are from the less educated or uneducated lower classes of society. The gossiping in-laws and neighbors in this crowded space in their most vivid forms are a realistic representation of this particular social class in this specific era. Yet rather than these demonstrations of ordinary, everyday realities Makhmalbaf is more concerned with what lies beneath the surface of these exchanges and the thought processes of individual characters. In this sense, he is more like a psychoanalyst, more focused on what makes them suffer and *how* it makes them feel than on the structure of a perfect plot.

In his depiction of mental and physical turmoil, Makhmalbaf explores the limits of realism, most known for its faithfulness to external reality. His realist depictions of normal encounters between characters are always marked by the psychoanalytic excavation of their deepest emotions and anxieties. In the space of actual dialogues which do not reveal much about the reality of the characters’ inner feelings, the narrator digs up these internal spaces and discovers things that contradict the words exchanged on the surface. The novel thus takes on modernist elements marked by an obsession with subjective feelings and psychological time in its narration of internalized monologues about personal fears and memories. Makhmalbaf adopts different styles in *Crystal Garden*. On the one hand, his novel is a social critique that reveals a side of society in its depiction of the malaise of the ill-fated poor and working class as a

consequence of war. On the other hand, in narrating the post traumatic abyss of the characters, Makhmalbaf performs a psychoanalytic excavation of their deepest fears and anxieties during the war and the consequences of extreme social and political change. There is something deeper going on behind the surface, a story that resists the normalizing methods of traditional realism.

Characteristically, realism has brought literature in close contact with the common practical and communicative function of language. Realism has also been concerned with representing objective reality through the detailed examination and faithful description of the social environment and the inclusion of convincing characters, with no special interest in aesthetics and formal creation or the psychology of the characters. Modernism, on the other hand, is defined by its resistance to “reality fabrications that are recuperable as stories or as situations that can readily be reformulated in socioparagmatic terms” (Eysteinnsson 187). This does not mean that modernism rejects reality, but it usually seeks reality as it is processed by human consciousness, fragmented and interrupted. Realism, though, also marks a distinction between literary language and common language by presenting a world shared by characters in a shared society, “a society in which meaning is evenly shared” (Eysteinnsson 195). With respect to realism, Erich Auerbach and Michael Rothberg have both pointed to the significance of elevating certain character types (in the latter’s case, the trauma victim) as the subject matter of a novel in order to distinguish traditional realism with modern realism. (Auerbach 491). Rothberg suggests a “non-reductive articulation of the extreme and the everyday,” a process that would make possible a new form of realism, one more compatible with the ongoing forms of trauma so common in the twenty first century (118).

Makhmalbaf’s narrative skillfully blurs the distinctions between the realist and modernist dichotomy by remaining faithful to all the elements of a realist novel in developing a story

situated within a specific social, cultural, historical, and political context while drawing heavily on his characters' internal anxieties. He accomplishes this in part by employing uncanny and surrealist elements in the novel. Disruption and estrangement, two features of modernist writing, are introduced into *Crystal Garden* by the presence of effects that arouse fear and horror.<sup>82</sup>

A key example of this technique is given six days after Layeh's third child Setareh is born. After all the neighbors have left her room, Layeh is drawn into her memories of the day she married Mansoor. The memory of her bouquet of wildflowers that Mansoor had handpicked one by one to give her at the wedding is followed by a sleepless night, during which Layeh sees a shadowy figure behind the window who pushes the door open to come inside. The figure resembles a human and non-human at the same time with a head full of long white hair. The white-headed woman eventually reaches Layeh, grabs her by the wrists, lifts her weightless body out and off the bed, and throws and thrashes her to a corner of the room. Then, from where she stands, the white-headed woman stretches her arms to the other side of the room and pulls Layeh's dress. She shows Layeh her hoofed feet and laughs hysterically. Layeh wants to run away, but she is frozen. She wants to scream, but her jaws are locked and her voice is choked in her throat. The white-headed woman lets her hair loose in the wind and it rubs Layeh's face. Thousands of nails pinch Layeh's body and face with the touch of the hair. Layeh jumps up screaming from a nightmare but still sees the woman with her own eyes pushing the door open. The woman turns the lights off, pulls away the blanket from Layeh and her children, takes her hands and pulls her away from her children, and throws her to a corner of the room like a

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<sup>82</sup> Some critics have written about the mixture of romanticism, expressionism, symbolism, and realism in Makhmalbaf's works. See Taheri, Hamid. "A reflection on the Influence of European Literary Schools on the Stories of Makhmalbaf." *Journal of the Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Tabriz University*. vol. 196, no. 48, 2005, pp. 159-193.

weightless bed sheet. The scene ends with the narrator's comment, "The morning came a thousand years later" (Makhmalbaf 37).

This nightmarish, uncanny figure projected into Layeh's reality is not a direct reference to the absence of her beloved husband (her safe haven, protector, father figure, and lost backbone), it instead acts as an indirect reference to loss. This is what Rothberg refers to as an index in traumatic realism, a referent that points to a necessary absence instead of indicating the object or phenomenon that caused it. It is the absence that makes the referent present (Rothberg 104).

Makhmalbaf's gaze is thus informed by traumatic realism, incorporating elements of a modern world traumatized at the level of an individual psychic neurosis caused by war, poverty, and madness. The dichotomy between dream and reality in the dream sequence evaporates in the world of Layeh's suffering, giving life to an unknowable and unsharable experience of loss and fear. The psychical in the world of the traumatized takes over external reality. Primitive beliefs clothed as reality invade the dream and real worlds of Makhmalbaf's characters, creating uneasy, uncanny effects that give shape to their deepest anxieties. In Layeh's dream scene the uncanny appears as a fusion of the objective and subjective styles of the novel born in the combination of realist and modernist approaches in the narration. Realistic details of the characters' daily lives are ruptured by the psychoanalytic interference of the narrator, who delves into their subjective experience while fantastic elements highlight the interconnections between their internal and external states. At the same time, however, these ruptures are related with the accuracy and detail of objective narration.



### **Exhuming the Body, Disclosing a Painful Loss**

Making the presence of the dead palpable establishes the continued impact of the dead on the survivors, and draws the readers, like the characters, into the reemergence of traumatic history.

Laurie Vickroy (“Remembering History through the Body”)

Mashhadi and his wife Aliyeh, their daughter-in-law, Souri, and her two children, Samira and Salman all live under the shadow of the death of Akbar in the war. Mashhadi feels morally obliged to protect and help Akbar’s family, and he encourages Ahmad, his second son who is fighting in the war, to marry his brother’s young widow, so that she and the children will remain within the caring and loving family of their own blood father. Accepting this marriage takes an immense emotional toll on all the members of the family. Though according to religion, culture, and law, the marriage is not prohibited, morally the family feels indebted to Akbar. His gaze from his portraits on the walls makes Ahmad feel ashamed for invading his brother’s privacy and claiming the right to his wife and children. Aliyeh takes away the photos of his older son and hides them to alleviate this shame. Despite the removal of the portraits, Ahmad and Souri spend the night awake in the backyard talking, and they decide to take a trip away from the household, where they can consume their marriage. However, just as they begin to overcome their guilt away from home, make love, and start to love each other, rumors arrive that Akbar is alive and is a prisoner of war in Iraq.

This news turns the only happy moment in the novel upside down. Newly wedded Ahmad and Souri, who is now pregnant with Ahmad’s child, feel like strangers again. The conflicting feelings of shame and guilt, along with the joy and fears of Mashhadi and Aliyeh over the news of their son, overwhelms the family and the narrative. However, they soon find out that there were two Akbar Soleymanies enlisted in the war; one is dead and buried and the other

a prisoner of war. They decide that they must find out whether the body (which they have buried without being allowed to see), it is in fact their son. To do this, they must exhume the body, for this is the only way to overcome the unspeakable trepidation and anxieties the family is enduring.

The most poignant moment of the story – the scene of exhumation – is central to the discussion and intersection of violence, body, the psyche and the dilemmas of representation in traumatic realism. The intensity of palpable emotions over the grave makes for a surreal scene in the cemetery, one which Makhmalbaf describes vividly. Aliyeh moans and chokes with every piece of dirt the gravedigger breaks to reach the body. She seems to die at every blow of the pick axe on the ground, as though the gravedigger is pulling the rocks and dirt out of her tormented heart; “where should she take all these pains?” (Makhmalbaf 271) the narrator asks, indicating a sense of discontent with his own narrative’s ability to deliver the surreal, raw experience of having to dig one’s own child out the grave. The psychic commotion experienced by everyone who is present at the site of exhumation is like that of an archeological dig in which layer after layer of dirt must be removed in order to reach, in this case, a body that must be found, recognized, believed, and mourned again. As it turns out, first they dig up the wrong grave and find instead a horrifying skeleton in sludge, with thousands of worms wriggling about. They put the body back and start another dig. This time they find the intact and bleeding body of their beloved Akbar, tall, handsome, fragrant with heavenly scents, with the same dark birthmark on his chest, but with half his head and face blown away. Mashhadi kisses and smells his son’s body all over, Aliyeh experiences the excruciating pain of loss of her beloved son all over again, and Souri feels relieved and heartbroken at the same time. The four of them return home at dawn,

looking like a bunch of skeletons, so much changed by the experience that Maliheh, Hamid's wife, does not recognize them at first.

What makes the event of the exhumation significant is that it represents an occasion for reliving a brutal loss, a moment that becomes a profound link between the death of the loved one and the eternal guilt of the survivor. The death and the subsequent exhumation of Akbar (the son of Mashhadi and Aliyeh, brother to Ahmad, husband to Sourì, a friend to Hamid, and a soldier in war) opens up a fresh wound in their lives. The loss, which was not properly mourned when it initially happened, returns to haunt the survivors. Not seeing the face and the body of Akbar before it was initially buried created a void that remained at the unconscious level of the living. In the end, the mutilated body demanded a proper witnessing and recognition of the brutality it had experienced.

Yet, the exhumation of the dead body also creates havoc in the family; the witnessing disperses them into different forms of madness. The traumatic events are represented here as unresolvable and irreducible to meaning and to narrative. Aliyeh screams and moans and beats herself up while her son's body is exhumed, as if she is losing her son for the second time, as if her son must die another death, and she dies inside at the sight of his dead body. Sourì remains fixated on a faraway horizon as the gravedigger digs out the dirt, and "Mashhadi came back from the graves looking like a ghost. He had died on that same night. All the flesh on his body was lost to the horror and anxiety" (Makhmalbaf 280). Only the narrator seems to have a limited knowledge of and an ability to tell *what it was like* to experience a loss for a second time; the characters themselves never exchange a word about their anxieties – they can only weep and moan. The comprehension of the traumatic scene, the loss of a loved one to a brutal event, has reached its limits.

The representation of the wounded and dead body, entombment, and exhumation is the central crisis of this novel. The freshness of the dead body that still bleeds, despite having been buried for one year, suggests symbolically the innocence of the dead in the face of brutality and the body's demand to bear witness. It also evokes the never-ending freshness of a traumatic loss, a story that opens anew and remains afresh in the consciousness of the individual subjected to that loss. The title of the novel is mentioned at this scene. The witnesses of exhumation are envious of the death of their loved one, who now lives in a *Crystal Garden*. The exhumation of the dead body marks an end to certainties: *Crystal Garden* is not an allusion to peace in paradise, but to the nature of a hellish life for those who suffer in living. Akbar's is a death that resists closure and erasure. This traumatic loss does not belong to the archive of finished history, it bleeds into the present and interrupts the future. The dead body becomes a text in need of interpretation and understanding, since it has the power to disrupt the normalcy of everyday life and break the assumptions of the linear empiricism of traumatic history. The traumatic death becomes, to use Caruth's term, an "intrusive phenomena."

The surreal quality of the scene (which leads to yet another final surrealist climactic prospect at the end of the novel) keeps the elements of ordinary reality in check, so as not to depart from the touchable and comprehensible dimensions of traumatic loss and to keep the traumatic history and its consequences from becoming a redemptive and religious ecstasy. The metaphoric and symbolic exhumation of the dead body is not totally detached from reality. At the high point of anxiety, fear, and grief, an exchange of comments, complaints, and quarrels between Mashhadi and the gravedigger makes the scene all the more believable and ordinary. Yet the madness that follows the exhumation resists any uplifting spiritual interpretation.

### **The Surreality of the Real**

The horror of the experience of excavating and identifying the dead body destroys the entire family. Ahmad, the newly married groom, returns to the front, leaving his pregnant wife in the midst of a psychological breakdown. Souri appears bewildered and manic, singing wedding songs, recognizing no one, and acting at times so hysterical that she is sent to a mental hospital. Mashhadi starts talking to himself and finds the war front to be the only remedy to his distress, and he joins his son in the war. Not long after they rejoin the war, both father and son die in the battle. Aliyeh, having been re-traumatized by the sight of her son's dead body dug out of the grave and then losing her other son and husband, descends into madness. Numbed by a shock she cannot comprehend, she is unable to grieve her husband and son. She shows no sign of emotion. After the funeral and memorial of Mashhadi and Ahmad, Aliyeh sits down to reflect. She is bewildered by this unusual lack of emotional response. How can she cry when she does not believe what has happened to the remaining men of her family? Her words in the aftereffects of the shock are delivered through a few pages of non-stop, irrational, fragmented, and meaningless ramblings – a mad woman dissociated from reality. She spits on the ground and curses the earth: "Curse you... curse you. You took all my dear beloveds from me. Which corner of yours did I own that for one span you took three times more from me? Curse you..." (323).<sup>83</sup> In her irrational monologue, she curses everybody and everything yet cannot address the death of her loved ones. She curses her sons and husband for their irresponsible attitude in not taking a leave

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<sup>83</sup> This is a reference to the novel in Persian. See Makhmalbaf, Mohsen. *Baghe-e-Boloor* [*Crystal Garden*]. Tehran, Nashr-e-Ney, 1986.

to visit her. She is in total denial. She starts to adore her sons and then, in a reversal, to curse them and her ominous daughter-in-law for bringing bad luck. Then, she feels regretful and speaks lovingly of her. Addressing a tragic loss for a traumatized psyche does not form itself into a conventional, chronological or coherent sense. After this incident, Aliyeh is sent to a mental institution, and two months after her return, she remains proud of her two sons and speaks of how jealous the nurses were of her having two boys.

By the end of the novel, the doomed residents of the house must officially evacuate the confiscated house. Traumatic events unfold one after another chasing the characters in a loop; they whirl in circles and follow the characters, leaving them no space to escape. The house is taken back by the original owner, and all the residents give up their temporary, limited space and move to a single hotel room, where, crammed together, they hang curtains to create private spaces. Souri, her two children, and Aliyeh in one section, Maliheh and Hamid and their newly adopted daughter in another section, and Layeh and her three children in a space of their own. The areas in which the characters live and breathe become more crowded, alluding to the impossibility of such living conditions for these women and children who have lost their men in war. The only man left in the room, ironically, is the paralyzed Hamid. Souri gives birth to her third child from her second martyred husband and again becomes institutionalized. This time she doesn't return with her newborn child from the hospital; her story remains unfinished and her destiny unknown. Her three children are left to be raised by their old, madness-stricken grandmother. Layeh seems to follow Khorshid, who is an expert in living with numerous men in temporary marriages, and the destiny of her three children remains untold and unresolved. The narrator's presence in the novel ends when Khorshid asks Layeh to go with her. Hamid and Maliheh, who have adopted an orphan child, spend their time teaching her to show emotions and

utter words that are seemingly lost to the shock of having been bombed and from the loss of her parents.

In the final scene of the novel, Makhmalbaf adopts a symbolic resolution as the only solution to the cries of a generation lost in the loop of traumatic suffering. The unusual vociferous and ceaseless cries of the baby and the consequent streaming of milk into Aliyeh's breast take Makhmalbaf's social realist narrative to a whole new and surreal direction (Dabbashi 39). Realism becomes lost in these expressions of trauma, pain and suffering and the expression of tragic events returns to the sounds and cries before language and meaning are born. With all the members of the residence gone or perished, all the men lost in war, only an uncanny magical incident might help a lost, hopeless generation of women and children. The very last, heart-wrenching scene of the novel illuminates this temporal landscape of, a traumatic past, present, and unknown future. In the half-dark, half-lit courtyard of the hotel, Aliyeh begins to slash her face with her own fingers furiously. She tears her dress and begins to beat herself up ceaselessly. She puts her breast in the baby's mouth. The baby grabs Aliyeh's nipple in his mouth and starts to suck.

Excruciating pain was running wild from the surface of Aliyeh's skin to the very depth of her heart. The baby was chewing on her. Aliyeh was aflame and burning. Her heart and her guts were twisting, turning together. [...] Aliyeh stood up. She raised her head towards the sky, her lips squeezed under her teeth. Blood gushed to her face and she roared:

'Where are you God? Are you there?' Something in her began to flow. Her heart began to palpitate. She stood up involuntarily and jolted to a run. The infant had put all his remaining strength into his lips and began to suck her breast. Aliyeh's heart was pumping madly. The veins in her neck were swollen in fury. Something, burning her from within, began to swell from the very depth of her heart and gushed forth towards her breast, burning and cutting through the nipple. Fresh milk streaming into the infant's mouth. The entire earth was becoming young. What is the time? Where is this place? (Dabbashi 104)

The excess of painful reality culminates in this surreal scene to confirm the interconnectedness of traumatic experience with the surreal and the limits of realism in portraying painful reality. Dominick LaCapra discusses two forms of remembering trauma and its historical documentation. The first, which he considers the more desirable one, results in the process of “working-through”; the other is based on denial and results in “acting-out.” In his critique of Lacanian style psychoanalysis, which he identifies as a form of “acting out” and in which psychoanalysis turns out to be “delusional, rigid, paranoid,” the Real is always inaccessible, illusive, and truth is always “allied with fragmentation, helplessness, lack”. LaCapra argues for another kind of acting-out, the sort that is required for the process of working-through. In his opinion “the symbolic would mark the entry into language in the specific sense of the usage... that would not definitively transcend all blind spots, bring total integration, or even serve as a cure for psychosis but would at least enable (while never ensuring) a viable role for critical judgment and responsible action” (208). In confronting certain problems such as the traumatic loss of a loved one, Freud introduced the concept of working-through by means of mourning. He distinguished between the healthy process of grief and mourning and that found in melancholia, where mourning for the lost other becomes impossible. The traumatized in the experience of melancholia is never able to transcend the attachment to a lost other, so the loss becomes a permanent loss, not of an object outside of the self but something from within the subject. The representational form of this endless mourning can be seen in the reenactment and obsessive and compulsive repetition of traumatic memory.

LaCapra takes issue with melancholia that merely acts-out trauma without the possibility of working through it. He opposes any kind of narrative, representation, and analysis that only acts out a trauma that can be read in posing a paradoxical question: “How do you affirm a



democratic politics if you don't have some notion of working-through that is not identical to full transcendence, and yet is distinguishable from, and acts as a countervailing force to, endless repetition of the past or being implicated in the trauma, or continually validating the trauma?" Is Makhmalbaf representing a form of mourning that blocks critical judgment and hinders the social and constitutional change that he would view as desirable? Are the fantasmic and surreal elements that he employs to make the narration of extremity even possible representative of a form of excess, turning unbearable events and circumstances sublime for the sake of literary aesthetics? One way to answer this question is to consider the aftereffects and end results of employing these literary tools and techniques.

In the case of the paralyzed veteran Hamid, who carries with him both physical and psychological wounds of war, the encounter with the exhumed dead body of Akbar becomes a cathartic moment. The encounter transforms Hamid into a different character. Though previously skeptical and reserved toward his wife, isolated and bitter in relation to the rest of the characters and the outside world, by mediating on his traumatic memories and his paralysis, he adopts a different attitude. The night of the disinterment, he decides to break from his shell of silence and solitude. On what the narrator refers to "the morning after that night," Hamid starts to go out of the house even in the cold of winter and decides to join in the veterans' wheelchair race along with another paralyzed comrade. He enthusiastically gets involved in adopting an orphan with Maliheh which changes their lives entirely. He actively embraces his passion for painting and drawing which he had quit in his darkest depressive moments. He even asks Maliheh to buy more colorful paints to give more life to his images. In the most unexpected turn, Hamid's symptoms of PTSD that had debilitated him in his daily psychical struggles disappear. By the end of the novel, even though he is still living under unstable and shaky grounds in a hotel room,

among the families whose men are dead and the women have either perished into madness or left for places unknown, he becomes convinced of his belief that he fought in a spiritually uplifting war. And his adopted daughter – whose birth parents were bombed dead under the rubble and who would gaze far into the distance without being able to show any signs of emotion or verbalize a word in the end – becomes attuned to her loving adoptive parents.

In contrast, for Mashhadi, his son Ahmad, Souri, and Aliyeh, the exhumation represents the end of their lives. An encounter with the past – a symbolic excavation of the martyred body – and the realization of a permanent loss results in further disparity, chaos, and madness. The men who join the war simply die without a single ideological or revolutionary motivation given in the novel for their departure and death. The only reason Makhmalbaf seems to find after all his digging into these two characters' thoughts and emotions is that they wanted to escape the humiliation of their lives, while leaving all the women and children on their own. Given the fact that Makhmalbaf dedicates the novel "To women, the oppressed of this land" and begins it with the physical and psychological pain of Layeh's labor and ends with Aliyeh's surreal experience of pain and helplessness, it is perhaps no surprise that he concludes the novel leaving the fate of the women unresolved.

In *Women and the War Story*, Miriam Cooke argues that:

There is no one history, no one story about war, that has greater claim to truth but that history is made up of multiple stories, many of them herstories, which emanate from and then reconstruct events. Each story told by someone who experienced a war, or by someone who saw someone who experienced a war, or by someone who read about someone who saw someone who experienced a war, becomes part of a mosaic the many colours and shapes of which make up the totality of that war. (4)

Cooke goes on to say that; "yet however exhaustive my research and reach, I cannot encompass this totality: I can always only tell an individual story" (4). Through the gaps and interruptions in the stories of individuals whose lives have disintegrated as a result of the war,

Makhmalbaf's novel suggests that perhaps there is no one way to capture the totality or any coherent narrative of this war or the revolution before that. And any attempt at a totalizing narrative would be the simplification and normalization of the history it tries to depict. In *Crystal Garden*, though all the women have experienced the loss of loved ones or suffered extreme complexities of life during the war and revolution, their stories are nevertheless unique.

Makhmalbaf does not offer a conclusive and false teleology of the fate of his characters, nor does he attend to the frontlines of the war. All that matters for him is what is left behind on the home front with real ordinary people.

His mastery lies in his ability to individualize each and every inhabitant of the crowded spaces of lower class of society. His characters all have names, and each individual has a story differentiated from others. Not all of the women are similar in their coping strategies of loss, nor do all of them, as the official discourse on war suggests, embrace martyrdom with open arms. His story resists and rejects the idea of a collective experience about the war since this has often sacrificed and oppressed the voice of suffering individual for the sake of a grand and ideological narrative. Makhmalbaf leads his readers to an unresolved and traumatic ending that does not allow for the possibility of easy resolution and recuperation. And given the fact that the novel was written five years into the long eight-year war, Makhmalbaf suggests that traumatic suffering and post-traumatic culture do not necessarily begin decades after the catastrophic events have passed. Symptoms and suffering start at the initial sight of trauma and continue long after the event.

Throughout *Crystal Garden*, the continuity of life is constantly jolted off balance. When a character or family starts to have a sense of stability, security, and happiness, even in its most precarious ways, an event of catastrophic nature follows. Traumatic incidents work as a

disruption of normalcy. The disruption suspends and defies desirable redemptive closure. The pain of loss always remains a pain, and the surreal, open-ended final part of the novel raises an unanswered question that speaks to the future; what will happen to these fatherless and motherless children under such isolating and chaotic conditions?

In the end, the psychological pressures of the traumatic witnessing of violence, poverty, loss of beloved friends and families, and isolation in the midst of war can be more challenging than some types of physical pain. Like chronic physical conditions, psychological trauma can dismember communicative language even when the causes of the pain can be objectified in the real world and outside the body itself. Psychological pain like physical pain, when at last it finds a language, similarly speaks of those three concentric circles that Scarry rightly indicates: “the outermost circle that describes the difficulty of expressing psychological pain, the second which describes the political complications that rise from this difficulty, and the third, the nature of both material and verbal expressibility or the nature of human creation” (3). As she also suggests, attributes of the suffering body can be severed from the body in order to prop up and solidify the legitimacy of a particular authority by referring to an unreal and abstract ideology in relation to the war efforts during a time of social crisis; but it can also refer back to certain material and empirical truths thereby making the subject of suffering visible. In Makhmabaf’s novel, internal, individual, and personal reality are the realities that he deems deserving of visibility. In *Crystal Garden*, he raises the curtain on the states of his characters’ internal conflicts by means of a psychoanalytic narrative that brings their inner states into the open. Without losing his connection to empirical truths about the war, he remains committed to referencing the physical, psychological, social, and political realities of his characters, while at

the same time, unsettling the comfort of his readers by not providing them any redemptive metaphysical closure.

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## CHAPTER 4

### THE BODY MATTERS, A VITAL KILLING

In the end moral and political truths have to be proved *on the body*, because this mass of nerve and muscle and blood is what we are.

Pat Barker (*RT* 305)

The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth.

Theodor W. Adorno (*Negative Dialectics* 17)

The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying-glass available.

Adorno (64)

In her analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, and Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* — which respectably explored the traumatic historical events of slavery, World War I, and the Vietnam War — Laurie Vickroy contends, “Social conflicts are enacted in characters’ personal conflicts, where historical trauma is personalized by exploring its effects in bodily violations and wounds. [...] the body becomes the testing ground of human endurance” (168). In the collection of short stories, *A Vital Killing* (2015), *من قاتل پسران هستم*, by novelist and essayist Ahmad Dehghan, the wounded body, finally, takes central stage in narratives of war and becomes a testimony to the unredeemable effects of war thirty years after the armistice. Thus, in this chapter it will be demonstrated that Dehghan is the Francisco Goya, Pablo Picasso, and Otto Dix of the Iran-Iraq war and his short stories can be in some ways, compared to Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* and in other ways reminiscent of great World War I poets like Siegfried Sassoon. The body, as a testing ground, in all representational materials of these names, regardless of whether it has fought a just war, an imposed war, an anti-



imperialist war, or an unjust war of aggression, becomes a canvas on which the brutality of war leaves its permanent mark.

Before writing *A Vital Killing*, Ahmad Dihqan (b. 1966) had established for himself a reputation as a memoirist, writing about his experiences as a combatant in the Iran-Iraq war. His early memoirs in *Roozhaye Akhar* [The Last Days] was a nostalgic reflection on his last days in the battlefield, just days before Iran signed the armistice. Dehghan's full evolution as a writer, however, manifested itself in his later novels. He attracted critical attention from literary critics in Iran with the publication of his first novel, *Safar be garaye divist va haftad darajih* (*Journey to Heading 270 Degrees*) in 1996.<sup>84</sup> While his early memoirs tend to echo the official idiom of war, his later fictional works convey the reality of experiences on the war front and post-traumatic consequences of that experience. His viciously honest, and traumatically real, representation of the psychological and physical impact of war leaves a lasting image in the reader's mind about what it means to be a witness to and a survivor of brutality. The torturous space between life and death that his socially marginal characters, veterans, and their loved ones experience negates any ideological and religious claim to a sacred war and instead highlights the unhealed wounds that remain in or on the body. The significance of Dehghan's narrative does not lie only in its subversion of the official narrative, rather, in my reading of the text, what is more imperative is the ways in which the material wounding becomes a signifier of the deeper sociopolitical structures while at the same time hinting at the impossibility of narrating and comprehending an extreme experience.<sup>85</sup> In the following analysis of selected stories in

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<sup>84</sup> *Journey to Heading 270 Degrees*, Ahmad Dehqan, introduced and translated by Paul Sprachman, Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2006.

<sup>85</sup> In recent years, with the publication of anti-war literature and literature more focused on negative consequences of war, scholars have paid attention to the dichotomy between Sacred Defense genre and subversive nature of other war literature. See for example, Moosavi, Amir, et al. "How to Write Death: Resignifying Martyrdom in Two Novels of the Iran-Iraq War." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, vol. 35, Jan. 2015, pp. 9–31.

Dehghan's collection, the wounded body and psyche become contested sites of moral, ethical, and historical truth.<sup>86</sup>

### **Passenger**

The collection opens with a story titled "Passenger," narrated from the first-person point of view of a veteran named Nasser. He receives a letter from Naneh Maryam, his comrade's mother. The letter contains only scribbles on a faded paper. After turning the paper around in every possible direction and scrutinizing the meaning of all the signs and symbols, the narrator together with his wife finally discern between the crooked lines an image of a body lying down with covers pulled up to his chin. Nasser calls Naneh Maryam, who does not recognize him, but quietly whispers that her son, Abdo, has come back exhausted from war and is sleeping in his room. Nasser tells the reader that before she lost her son Abdo to war, Naneh Maryam's husband was lined up against a wall with the other men of the village and executed by firing squad. She and her younger son, Jasem, escaped the chaos but later returned to stay close to Abdo, who was fighting on the front. Nasser's flashback recalls the mission he and Abdo were involved in to push back the enemy from the borders only to realize that the regiment had been exposed.

During their retreat, among flying fire and bullets, Abdo was shot in the leg and was never seen again.

Naneh Maryam sank to her knees when they gave her the news. Thereafter, she would sit in front of her home waiting in anticipation. Nasser would visit her in her burnt-down village whenever on leave. With tears running down her eyes she would hug Nasser and repeatedly ask him in a shuddering voice, "You haven't seen my Abdo, have you? [...]. Where on his body was he wounded? Who saw him? Why don't you go and bring my Abdo back? Why did you just leave him in the desert? Did he have food and water?"

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<sup>86</sup> In an interview with Mashregh News, Dehghan reveals his intentions of writing this collection which has been under attack by pro-Sacred Defense ideology: "We have 500,000 veterans in this country, 499,000 of whom are not seen, [...] I tried to represent the 499,000 people who are not seen." See [mshrgh.ir/499965](http://mshrgh.ir/499965)

Gradually, Naneh Maryam gets worse after the war. She would sit quietly and stare blankly into space. (Dehghan 13)

Later on, Jassem reveals that his mother went missing for a few days, until she came back with blistered feet and a burlap bag full of bones. She then lined up the bones in the bedroom and covered them with a blanket, telling everyone, Abdo has come back home. From then on, she would lock herself up in the bedroom with the bones and only come out occasionally. She would speak in a whispering tone as not to wake Abdo. As Nasser is about to leave home to visit Naneh Maryam in the South, Jassem informs him that she has gone missing and has left home with the bones, and that he and the men of the tribe had searched and followed her footprints into the sea. Everyone takes lanterns and boats into the Karoon River to search for Naneh Maryam and Abdo. Dehghan finishes the story with a simple, straightforward, and unsympathetic sentence: “Laylee has packed my bag. I will need to leave soon so as not to miss the last train” (*A Vital Killing* 16).

Dehghan’s story raises an important question about madness as an aftereffect of traumatic loss: how can one develop amnesia about an event that inspires such trauma? The story, similar to Aliyeh’s in *Crystal Garden*, illustrates how trauma can tremendously rock and alter a person’s conception of self, of time, and of place. Naneh Maryam’s incomprehensible loss causes her dissociative amnesia, denial, and self numbing. With her dissociation, she becomes someone for whom the specific traumatic event never happens, sending her into a form of madness.<sup>87</sup> Her madness is clearly linked to trauma, with identifiable sources – a truth of traumatic injury. The act also is a defense mechanism against the loss of the loved object. Both the bones she arranges in bed in the form of a sleeping body, and later the sleeping body’s shape and layout she

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<sup>87</sup> Clinicians such as Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk, believe in the theory of dissociation, which is related to the concept of repressed memory, or traumatic amnesia. According to this view, the more shocking and prolonged the trauma, the more the subject has a tendency to dissociate. See Suleiman, Susan Rubin. “Judith Herman and Contemporary Trauma Theory.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 1/2, Spring/Summer 2008, pp. 276–281.

scribbles on the letter that she sends to the narrator, represent the mother's irreparable loss, an emotional stasis common to trauma survivors. In her act of caring for collected bones, she continues to deny the loss and remain in her role as a caretaker and a mother, an example of which can be found in other literary representations of the extreme pain of loss, such as narratives of slavery.

In her unforgiving narrative of slavery in *Beloved*, Toni Morrison narrates a similar troubling engagement with trauma involving the loss of a beloved child. In comparable fashion, Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, who in dealing with unfathomable losses in her family and what she and her race endured before and during American Civil War, represses and denies her traumatic memories. Yet denial and repression of reality does not cleanse the undeniable pain she suffers. The ghost of her infant daughter, Beloved, who she kills to set her free from white owners, returns to haunt and wipe her almost out of existence. Sethe nourishes and cherishes this traumatic experience, the full embodied force of which takes her to the point of emaciating herself and taking her own life. Judith Herman points to this type of defense, a form of incorporating the traumatic context, as having some sort of comforting effect which, though not curative, prevents feelings of total helplessness (Vickroy 124).

Common to survivors of trauma like Aliyeh in Makhmalbaf's *Crystal Garden*, who experienced multiple temporary breakdowns over the loss of all her loved ones, Naneh Maryam denies her son's likely death, but in her case her break from reality comes without recovery or a return to sanity. And like the scene of exhumation of the dead body in Makhmalbaf's novel, here too the body demands dignity, recognition, and proper burial so the loss can be believed and mourned. Unlike *Crystal Garden*, where the missing dead body is recovered and receives its recognition, in "Passenger" the soldier missing in action becomes a permanent loss to be

wondered about forever. In both stories, however, the loss of a loved one, a psychological trauma, causes melancholia, madness, and an impossible mourning.

The themes explored in Dehghan's collection resonate with the enduring reality and aftereffects of the Iran-Iraq war, in a country where almost twelve thousand families, thirty years on, still await the remains of their loved ones. The stories are a much needed supplement for the official recorded history of the war. The author, who himself served in multiple battles where he saw countless friends, comrades, and fellow citizens die in battle or continue to suffer the after effects of war, chose not to remain silent about its brutal emotional consequences.<sup>88</sup> History, as Pierre Nora states, tells "of what is no longer, but memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past" (Vickroy 169).

Dehghan, based on his own experiences, uses his narrator and his characters' memories and internal turmoil to present a different narrative than the official historical narrative, in ways that paint a far more bleak image of the war and its aftermath. In almost all of the stories in his collection, the emotional, traumatic, and climactic scenes take place in the narrator's flashbacks minus the colorful scenery depicted in *Sparrows* or the visual art of the previous chapters. In *A Vital Killing* the present is understood as a perpetual personal struggle against an internal emotional abyss originating in a trauma that, though created by events in the past, continues to haunt the present. Writing itself becomes a defense against the debilitating effects of traumatic memory. The literary scholar and writer Gabriele Schwab, who grew up listening to her parents telling stories of WWII in Germany, used to secretly fill in between the lines of her parents' books with "squiggly lines and dots and signs when she did not know how to read and write, a child's hieroglyphs" (3). Coming across them years later, she realizes that the signs crawling in

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<sup>88</sup> In his interview, Dehghan talks about the consequences of war: "The book *Man Ghatel-e-pesaretan Hastam* is not a protest against the people of war, but a protest against the fate of these people after the war." [mshrgh.ir/499965](http://mshrgh.ir/499965).

empty spaces, like the “bookworms” of her own cryptographic writing and like Naneh Maryam’s scribbles, held a sort of referent to the stories she had heard and that she wanted her scribbles to tell. “Writing was lonely from the very beginning,” writes Schwab, “Writing was also the fulfillment of the wish to inhabit a space of secret desire” (3).

Dehghan’s harsh, realist narrative leaves no room for the symbolic representation of sacrificial suffering and death in exchange for redemption and happiness in the afterlife.<sup>89</sup> The mother in his story resembles the image of a ghost-like madwoman collecting bones in Khoury’s *Gate of the Sun*. In this novel, the character Yunes, a freedom fighter, prays that God will bless him with forgetfulness so he won’t remember the woman wandering alone among the demolished graves, picking things up and putting them back in a bag on her back. After she is shot to death by Israeli forces, people discover her collection was that of the bones of dead people scattered all around her body on the ground. The image which keeps slipping into Yunes’ thoughts “like a phantom” (61) is a constant visual reminder of the chaos of war in which people might even choose to forget their own children. As Yunes recalls, “In those days, Son, we left everything. We left the dead unburied and fled” (Khoury 63). Echoing these remarks, the ex-soldier/narrator in “Passenger”, who experienced the chaos firsthand, admits that “It wasn’t like anyone could take care of anyone else in that turmoil” (Dehghan 13).

### **A Dog’s Life**

The third story in Dehghan’s collection, “A Dog’s Life”, puts the human body at the center of its focus. Both what the veterans suffer and what their families witness and go through provide significant insight into the most private spaces of their lives, experiences that otherwise

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<sup>89</sup> Dehghan believes realism is the language that ordinary people can relate to. He emphasized on the necessity of realism in war genre, “Let’s write about war in such a way that 70 million Iranians understand it, I have a tendency to be a realist in all my writing.” Ghodrati, Maryam. Conversation with Ahmad Dehghan. Tehran. Aug 2019.

would not be accessible to others. The physical and psychological transformation of the affected veterans of war and the ghastly suffering they endure are in full view in this story, which gives just a very short glimpse of their lives. The narrator, a veteran of war who is suffering, describes entering a long corridor with a “hubbub of people coming and going like columns of ants. Many missing limbs. Some look down the endless hallway with an errant eye, and I can tell right away by the fixed pupil that the eye is artificial” (Dehghan, *A Vital Killing* 26). After describing the gloomy and endless yellow hallways and the crowd of mutilated bodies shouting to each other, some arguing with themselves, he enters a room in which he along with many others is expected to hand in an application. The air is hot and the noise of the crowd causes a voice in his head to demand that he attack them. He keeps his hands tightly by his side and tries not to listen to the voice in his head, as his doctor has advised, but the heat in the office triggers the memory of the incident that led him to this room. The reader accompanies the narrator on this flashback to an incident in his house where his ears start to ring and the room starts to spin. He recalls calling his wife, and when she comes to him, he sees her in pieces. He goes toward her but cannot remember anything after that. Coming back to himself, he understands that “the poor woman” had picked him up, laid him against the pile of bedding, and was scrubbing the carpet in the middle of the room, “I must have vomited all over the room. When I moved, she turned to look at me, and I saw her bloody lip and the welts of my handprint on her cheek” (Dehghan, *A Vital Killing* 28).

These events are narrated without going into the details of the emotions evolved. The narrator does not try to describe any further pain his wife might have experienced. The scene is framed as a photograph, something to be seen, devoid of emotional affect, only an image to be apprehended by the reader. The image that this scene leaves with the reader is similar to

Monem's photography of the victims of chemical attacks, where the man is tied to his oxygen tank and looks down from the second floor of the building while his distraught daughter watches him. For the subject, an extreme experience kills off any ethical, emotional, or logical thinking, or elucidation of the circumstances.

The image that Dehghan creates in words is reminiscent of the nauseating scenes in Goya's *Disasters of War* series. When the narrator in "A Dog's Life," who is not given a name by the author and does not introduce himself via a first-person narrative, returns to himself, his friend (who he finds in a "feeble condition walking on two canes") is waiting to give him the important news: "that having a grave in the city cemetery had been recently added to the benefits [they] received" (Dehghan, *A Vital Killing* 28). Back in the office again, a man is on the ground "convulsing and foaming at the mouth." Having thrown up all over the room, he is dragged by his arms and legs "like a slaughtered lamb" by two men who have come to help (Dehghan, *A Vital Killing* 29). The room is full of mutilated bodies of veterans who have been granted subsidized graves. Those who were poisoned by chemicals vomit, faint, and compete against each other in the cramped, gloomy hallways to get the bureaucratic approval for their graves and then sell them for twice the price on the free market.

The story ends as the narrator gets his document, signed and stamped like a death certificate:

They sign the bottom, stamp it and hand it back to me. I tuck the document deep down into my pocket as I walk out of the office so that I won't lose it if I have a seizure. The man who had a seizure passes me as I walk briskly down the dark, yellow corridor. I pick up my pace so as not to be left behind. (Dehghan, *Vital Killing* 30)

In this story, Dehghan effectively creates a space for the marginal cases of PTSD and severely wounded veterans whose experience of suffering has remained unwritten and repressed and whose lives have become defined by the agonizing pain of their flesh. Within these sharp,



short excerpts, the history of the sacred defense loses its meaning. Vickroy notes that “Survivors have testified that bodily violations, deprivations, and humiliations are some of the most defeating aspects of traumatic experience” (209). In the space of this bitter and dark reality, the narrator attempts to turn the spotlight on himself and against the repression and tyranny of the collectivity and official narrative. He demands an attentive response to the harsh conditions of severely disabled veterans and presents trauma as a two-fold concept — rooted in the extreme conditions of the past, yet realized in an even more extreme present. This two-fold trauma is represented in the malfunctioning of a system that fails to help alleviate the pain and suffering of the damaged body and psyche of veterans, resulting in further segregation from normal reintegration into the social and cultural spheres of life. This story reminds us, as Caruth suggests, that the voice of the suffering body can offer us alternative histories. The individual suffering body in Dehghan’s narrative is a lasting reminder of what it means to experience the violence of war and to suffer its consequences every day, without giving that experience an aura of otherworldliness. It is in the perpetual dismay of the present moment, the post-traumatic suffering of the body and psyche, that the true nature of a supposed sacred war is renewed and redefined.

### **Stamps**

Dehghan’s story “Stamps” opens with a single paradoxical proposition: he affirms the impossibility of comprehending a survivor’s traumatic experience, and yet, despite this impossibility, demands recognition of these psychiatric and PTSD patients, wounded in and by war and then relegated and secluded in hidden corners of society, treated like zombies and monsters.

Nobody knows what happened to Idris — not even his aging mother who comes out to the alley at sunset, takes him by the hand and leads him back home. [...] Idris has become a slovenly, spacey creature that ventures out in the evening [...] From the moment the sun begins to disappear over the horizon and inches out of sight, Idris takes on a strange quality. His face grows redder and redder until for a moment he looks like a blister about to burst. He yells and thrashes about and utters words no one has ever been able to understand. Then his elderly mother approaches Idris. Weeping, she takes his hand and leads him home. (*Vital Killing* 32)

As the narrator recounts, he grew up together with Idris and his sister Roya, their houses facing each other during the revolution and the war that followed. He and Idris used to collect special stamps, including ones commemorating the revolution. The narrator recalls collecting stamps with Idris, his crush on his sister Roya, and also later angrily burning the stamps. He recounts the fact that Roya got herself involved in political activities during the period leading to the revolution and then one day went missing. As a result, he informs us, Idris grew distant, taking refuge inside his home and remaining friends with only the narrator. Years later, during the last year of war, Idris broke out of his isolation and joined the narrator in the war. A few months later, when both sides accept the United Nations Security Council Resolution 598 and an armistice is signed, the war continues as the Iraqi-supported Mujahedeen-e-Khalq militant group proceeds to attack central Iran. As a result, on their way home, the narrator and Idris, who believe the war is over, are caught up in the chaos of another bloody conflict.

While firing bullets back, both shield themselves behind a corpse of a naked woman lying on the ground. They freeze when they find out that the corpse taking all the bullets to protect them is Roya's. Without telling the reader, the narrator indirectly signals that, since she went missing, Roya has secretly joined the Mujahedin against the Iranian central forces. They linger by Roya's side for a long time unable to do or say anything.<sup>90</sup> The narrator then sits and

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<sup>90</sup> Dehghan mentions the deletion of a segment in this scene where Roya's dead body is depicted to be mercilessly abused, refreshed by water, and raped was a condition for its publication. Ghodrati, Maryam. Conversation with Ahmad Dehghan. Tehran, Aug 2019.

watches Idris clawing away at the dirt with his bare hands until sunset to dig a grave for Roya. The narrator describes this grave as the grave of his own dreams and memories with Roya. Idris pulls Roya's body into the ditch, covers her with his shirt, and puts the dirt on her body until it forms a mound. The narrator describes Idris's immovable body, his pale face showing no sign of emotion, and his fingertips torn up; "There was whitish flesh, skin, and bone hanging like claws sunken into and pulled out from a carcass, dripping flesh and skin and blood. He had no fingertips or nails or bone [...] There was a mixture of dirt and sand and blood' (Dehghan 46). From that day on, the narrator relates, Idris remains as described in the quote above, an unhinged creature screaming every day at the sight of the sunset. The traumatic event is engraved in the memory of the witness to repeat itself in narrative and then to cling to the memory of the reader.

For Anglophone readers, the scene in Dehghan's story is likely to recall Tim O'Brien's recollections of the Vietnam War; for O'Brien's narrator in *The Things They Carried*, the images of the mutilation of his friends' bodies are similarly engraved in his memory;

I sit at this typewriter and stare through my words and watch Kiowa sinking into the deep muck of a shit field, or Curt Lemon hanging in pieces from a tree, and as I write about these things, the remembering is turned into a kind of rehappening. [...] The bad stuff never stops happening: it lives in its own dimension, replaying itself over and over. (32)

O'Brien recalls in some detail the way Curt Lemon was blown up as he struggles to tell the story. "He took a peculiar half step, [...], and the booby-trapped 105 round blew him into a tree. The parts were just hanging there..." So he and his other comrade were ordered to "peel him off." The narrator remembers the white bone of an arm. He remembers pieces of skin and something white and yellow that "must have been the intestines," he says. What wakes O'Brien up twenty years later is this nightmarish imagery and the fact that Lemon's friend were singing "Lemon Tree" while gathering his pieces from the tree. "The star-shaped hole" in the eye of a young

Vietnamese soldier whom Lt. Cross killed with a grenade in “The Man I killed” is yet another image that remains fixed in his memory and is compulsively repeated in his narrative which further emphasizes the mental degradation of soldiers in combat.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, Dehghan’s vivid visual memory of Roya’s naked body and Idris’s “whitish flesh, skin, and bone hanging” and the dripping flesh and skin and blood becomes the unforgivable and unforgettable fixated memory that repeats itself in his narrative and causes Idris his madness. Both narratives, register all sensations, specially in their visual accuracy, illustrating one of the unique characteristics of traumatic memories discussed in the second chapter.<sup>92</sup>

Dehghan’s story ends with the narrator by a fire, remembering the scene and burning all his stamps, not all at once but one by one, hoping that his “ruthless pain and anguish” leave him piece by piece. He is incapable of recalling all his memories or putting them out of his mind all at once. He wishes that one day he will be able to forget them by telling the story to someone and getting it off his chest once and for all. His actions are reminiscent of the scene when Tim O’Brien’s Lt. Cross burns all letters and photographs from his high school sweetheart Martha in an attempt to forget her; burning the stamps becomes an attempted exorcism of the narrator’s repressed, repetitive, and painful memories. Dehghan’s narrator throws the last stamp, the last physical reminder of her beloved Roya, in the fire and yet starts off toward where they found Roya’s body.

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<sup>91</sup> Dehghan’s original title for his collection translates into *I Am Your Son’s Murderer* which is the title for one of the short stories in this collection as well. In this story the narrator writes a letter to his dead comrade’s father to confess that he is responsible for the death of his son in the battle. Similarly, Tim O’Brien’s surrogate character in “The Man I killed” feels the same heavy burden of guilt in having lost Kiowa in Vietnam and wants to confess to his father by writing a letter and taking the responsibility.

<sup>92</sup> According to Van Der Kolk, such memories tend to be organized on the “sensory-motor and affective level.” He suggests that traumatic experiences initially are organized without semantic representations and that ‘memories’ of the trauma tend to, at least initially, be predominantly experienced as fragments of the sensory components of the event: as visual images, olfactory, auditory, or kinesthetic sensations, or intense waves of feelings (which patients usually claim to be representations of elements of the original traumatic event). (van der Kolk and Fisler 513)

As we saw earlier in “Passenger”, in this story the narrator again wants to take the reader to the sight of a brutal loss in an attempt to deliver the anguish of the emotional effects of familial separation and loss in the chaos of war. In both stories, the consequences are so incomprehensible that they lead to the madness of close relatives. In “Stamps,” the narrator as a witness to the events also finds the task impossible. Memories that guide his narrative are enacted only to then demonstrate the difficulties of accessing and understanding such experiences and the impossibility of finally freeing oneself from the grip of remembrance and repetition of the traumatic events. His memories cannot be burned like stamps, despite the narrator’s wish to do so. And his return to the site of traumatic experience at the end of the narrative suggests analogies with the injunctions of traumatic memory and its repetition compulsion. Idris’s psychological breakdown, his yelling and thrashing about everyday by sunset, is the material reminder of a catastrophic past; it identifies Roya’s brutal death as an “event [that] is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experienced it” (Caruth, *Trauma, Exploration in Memory* 4). The site of Roya’s death, as the narrator suggests, becomes an eternal return of an image to himself and to Idris, recalling Caruth’s claim that “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (*TEM* 3) just as the bloody and mutilated image of Idris digging a grave until his fingers are torn apart, and his subsequent madness, become obstacles to any resolution of the irreconcilability of the traumatic past with normal existence (Vickroy 180-81).

Dehghan’s realist accounts of survivors’ post-traumatic situations, far from advocating for the simply defined history of the Iran-Iraq war as a “sacred defense”, exemplifies what Rothberg calls “traumatic realism,” a form of narration which brings the incomprehensible and extreme to representation. In this variation on traditional, nineteenth-century realism, a

“documentation” takes place that is “beyond direct reference and coherent narrative but [does] not fully abandon the possibility for some kind of reference and some kind of narrative” (*TR* 101).

Without escaping entirely the rules for narrative realism, Dehghan produces the same kind of knowledge about post-traumatic crisis, and he does so at least as effectively as the expressionist accounts of postwar Germany in Wolfgang Borchert’s play *The Man Outside* (1947). Expressionism as a modernist movement, originating in Germany at the beginning of the 20th century, is known for its propensity to present the world uniquely from a subjective perspective, altering it drastically for emotional effect in order to evoke moods or ideas. What is fundamental for an Expressionist artist, as a reaction to positivism and styles of art such as Naturalism and Impressionism, is the meaning of emotional experience, rather than objective, physical reality.<sup>93</sup> This juxtaposition of the inside and internal versus the outside and external found in expressionism and realism is similar to the antagonism that exists between opponents of realism in representing extreme events like the Holocaust and its proponents who demand documentation of historical reality and empiricism. In this antagonism, as discussed in the introduction, a problem can arise from such anti-realist proposals concerning the representation of traumatic experience, is that events of a catastrophic nature are implicitly seen as transcending history, visualization, narrativization, explanation, which then moves toward a theologization of the event. Significant figures such as Elie Wiesel, Claude Lanzmann are proponents of this discourse of “transcendence,” and irresolvability of extreme into everyday, halting the established modes of representation and understanding. The realist tendency, on the other hand, proposes that extremity does not break “with the ordinary dimensions of the modern world but

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<sup>93</sup> See Tejera, V. *Art and Human Intelligence*. Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965.

exists on a continuum with it" (Rothberg, *TR* 4-5). Borchert's play clearly marks this distinction and highlights the immensity of the burden of emotional and psychological toll of war on a survivor. For him, the traumatic internal has the capability of turning the external world into an unreal nightmare.

The German playwright subtitled his work "*A play that no theatre wants to perform and no audience wants to see*," a distancing and alienating technique indicating the postwar attitude of society toward its estranged and marginalized veterans. In *The Man Outside*, a German veteran of World War II named Beckman returns home from Russia, only to find he has lost his wife and home to another man; he also finds himself now in a society that has moved on in his absence. and that turns a blind eye to this broken, ghost-like soldier, a walking dead reminder of the war. He knocks on doors, seeking refuge, yet finds himself shut out. What he constantly carries with him is the memory and guilt of having directed his eleven men to die in a mission. Like the many broken, traumatized soldiers discussed in this thesis, Beckman grapples with the meaning of his psychic imprisonment in feelings of guilt and his repetitive nightmares. This expressionist account delves into the emotional aspect of the post-traumatic crisis of war. Alienation, isolation, a crisis of identity and communication, the existential crisis and absurdity of life of a subject who is lingering between life and death are all depicted in this drama.

"An Expressionist wishes, above all, to express himself, [...] and builds on more complex psychic structures. Impressions and mental images that pass through ... people's souls as through a filter which rids them of all substantial accretions to produce their clear essence [...] and] are assimilated and condense into more general forms, into types, which he transcribes through simple short-hand formulae and symbols." (qtd in Gordon, *Expressionism: Art* 175) <sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> See Donald E. Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Ideas*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 175.

The juxtaposition of voices in the play suggests a struggle between memory and forgetting, an unattainable internal peace, and a gap between a normal and a traumatized psyche. Religion, art, authority, love, and humanistic affection all come under scrutiny and are criticized with harsh cynicism, represented through the personification and characterization of God, the producer, the colonel, and the Other, all of whom represent different groups and view point of the society at large. The characters' responses to Beckman further highlight his difficulty in communicating his traumatic experience to them; the gap between the survivor and the rest remains unbridgeable. The dreamlike quality of the play totally works against the realistic structure of the world where the survivor is a part of and as a response to the world's disregard for the wounded.

Traumatic realist narrative, on the other hand, mediates between the total disregard for reality in pure emotional and psychic expressionist response and the objective realism, by being committed to place the extreme within the exact structures that caused it. Dehghan's narratives all seem to be monologues of a singular narrator — without conversing with any members of society, ignoring an engagement with oppositional forces— and, as such, they deliver the remains and ruins of war imagery with one voice, one narrator's point of view, one decisive acknowledgment of the crisis: in short, a fictional autobiographical testimony. Each story seems to suggest that, if you have not seen it and experience it you cannot know it. The lack of dialogue further indicates the isolation of the subject in his world of suffering, the particularity and individuality of experience of pain, yet it also affirms the existence of this particular in the reality of an unsympathetic society.

### **The Mermaid**

The sheer force of the extreme and unbridgeable gap that exists between everyday normal and traumatic experience makes Dehghan's narrative unforgiving, a narrative that stands in the



space between realism and antirealism.<sup>95</sup> His story “Mermaid” opens with a quick, jarring, and sharp image of mutilation:

All three of us had been hit by shrapnel. We were taken to the field hospital behind the front. The shrapnel had wounded me in the abdomen and they were forced to remove three feet of my intestines. Mirza had to have both of his legs amputated below the knees. Davood had taken shrapnel to the eyes. [...] The three of us occupied a room with dingy grey walls splattered with blood that made you sick to look at as we drowned ourselves in memories of times before we were injured. It was as if room 324 was the beginning and the end of the world. (Dehghan, *A Vital Killing* 57)

Like wounds on the body, this reality is knowable, seeable, tangible, if not comprehensible for the suffering subject. The grotesque material reality is smoothed over by the normalcy of life; they all wish to see the nurse, who they call the mermaid and whose angelic voice they hear over the microphone. They fantasize about her and compete about who will get on his feet soonest and be able to walk to the end of the hallway to see her. The unnamed first-person narrator, who is the only one who can walk, feels the colostomy tube like a butcher knife turning inside his intestines and, with a pain twisting in his stomach, grips the edge of the bed and pulls himself out the door. Walking among the wounded men filling the hallways, he reaches the area where their angel is sitting in a glass room. He can’t see her and he can’t go any further, he won’t jeopardize their comradery in the “slaughterhouse-called-a-hospital” (Dehghan 63) or go against the promise they have made among themselves. The next week war flares up again at the front and, given the shortage of beds for the seriously wounded, all three are discharged from the hospital, meaning that none will be able to see the angel. The story ends with this imagery of amputation. Mirza will walk on two artificial legs for the rest of his life. The narrator’s

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<sup>95</sup> As discussed in the first chapter in Michael Rothberg’s book on traumatic realism, the Holocaust has generally assumed to pose exceptional challenges to realism and to representation. On the one hand, there is a demand for realism in the form of verifiable facts; on the other hand, the extremity of the Holocaust seems to have foreclosed any ability to represent it realistically. Rothberg refers to proponents of the position that the Holocaust is unrepresentable as “antirealists”.

colostomy bag is removed, and Davood still dreams of the angel's beauty, "for he will never see her again," an allusion to the fact that he is now gone blind (Dehghan 65). Without directly juxtaposing the symbolic and abstract concept of religious martyrdom with material reality, and therefore causing an antagonism between the sacred and the secular, Dehghan documents the new norms for the wounded survivors. The absence of a religious morality itself becomes a bitter testimony to the significance of total material annihilation of a human body. In this aspect, Dehghan's language closely resembles that of the British war poet Siegfried Sassoon, although the Iranian author is tactically more cautious about the consequences of putting the sacred and the material reality in opposition.

In particular, the sharpness of the language, the simplicity of the narrative, and the imagery that remains with the reader in Dehghan's realism is reminiscent of Siegfried Sassoon's poem "They". In response to a bishop who preaches about the holiness of the war, the World War I poet sarcastically describes his comrades' bodily wounds:

The Bishop tells us:

'When the boys come back  
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
'In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought  
'New right to breed an honorable race,  
'They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find  
'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.  
' And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

Caught up in the traumatic crisis of war and his deepest memories and emotions, Sassoon's responses to the Bishop in the second stanza are short, definitive, and pointed, as if his

version of reality is not compatible with any rhetorical figures, metaphor, or allegory; “For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind.” Identical to Dehghan’s comrades, who either would walk on artificial legs for the rest of their life, or will never see again, the material evidence of an otherwise holy war becomes too hard to ignore, yet too much one’s own to become representable in an emotional and empathic narrative. This is to say that “linguistic efforts must face their own difficulty in the paradox of the word pitched against the wordless, material reality of suffering- a reality so real, a certainty so calamitous, that any word added to it seems only to subtract from it” (Schweizer 16). Any redundancy would only take away and diminish from the indescribable reality he has witnessed.

In “They,” Sassoon’s account of the realities he has experienced is bitterly ironic. His unresolved problem with war and his eyewitness traumatic encounter with brutal death take the form of irritated criticism against the idealization and justification of war. He is outraged by the ignorance of religious authorities, the distance they create between themselves and those on the frontlines, and the belief system that undermines the reality of human pain in the real world, in exchange for promised redemption in the afterlife. Unlike Dehghan and Makhmalbaf, who question the one-dimensional religious interpretation of loss in war only implicitly, through absence of religious authority or ideology by focusing on the materiality of the body and the psyche, Sassoon critiques directly the religious justification of brutality. Distance makes “them”, the religious authority, immune and it positions the soldiers in face-to-face encounters with death. The outraged poet then juxtaposes the “change” that the bishop is preaching about in the second stanza and subverts this sermon by displaying the mutilations of his friends and comrades. The bitter irony in Sassoon’s poem is in direct contrast to religious sentiments. For

Sassoon, much like Dehghan, the ultimate truth is the dismemberment of the bodies, the body in pain, the body that survives death only to suffer indeterminately in life.

In Sassoon's poem, the soldiers' replies tend to pause at the end of lines, "end-stopping" each statement, similar to the diction in Dehghan's realist account of his comrades' situation; by doing so, both authors give a sense of complete meaning. As Sassoon puts it, "When the boys come back / They will not be the same": the meaning of the poem turns on this observation—that the war drastically changes the men who fought in it. Sassoon turns to this condescending sermonizing and remembers their individual histories as much as he can by naming the "boys" and by remembering them with their actual identity and individuality, countering the bishop's generalizations and idealization: "for George lost both his legs; Bill's stone blind; Poor Jim's shut through the lungs..." The exact naming of the "boys" not only gives life to the victims of idealized and seemingly justified wars, it also gives the history of World War I a specific face that otherwise would have been repressed by religious and political propaganda: "for they'll have fought / In a just cause," and the Bishop adds, "their comrades' blood has bought..." Thus, Sassoon explicitly compares the soldiers to Christ, who "bought" man eternal life by dying for their sins. The contrast Sassoon creates in the second stanza allows for a counterpoint to this interpretation of a "just" and "right" war, giving a coherent picture of the event and the debates shaping that catastrophe, even while it reflects on its incoherence and meaninglessness in the memory of the victim/survivor. Sassoon's ironic voice gives a whole broken nation a physical reality; it also gives the soldiers individuality, dignity, and identity (Griffiths p.#?).

As is evident from Sassoon's perspective on war, even the imperial and colonial politics benefits from the glorification of death in war, using human bodies as means for an end. Just as the crucifixion of Christ is used to shame ordinary human beings for their sins, the

crucifixion of Hossein in Karbala serves as a reminder that ordinary humans must strive for a similar perfection. No matter in which context, the material human body is always faced with the shame of weakness in the face of a super-human, God-like figure like Christ or Hossein, and he either chooses to be a scoundrel or chooses to follow their path toward a superior life. Similar to Tim O'Brien and Sassoon, Dehghan provides the reader with another point of view from which they are able to forget about the historical and religious associations with Hossein or Christ and the reality of present circumstances. Within these stories, there is no explicit ideological or ethical meaning attached to the narratives. The suffering body is for the first time allowed to express only itself, raw and detached. Neglectful of the eyes of the viewer, or the eyes of God, the suffering body reveals its true experience, its weaknesses, its shame, its pain in a very realistic narrative format.

Ernst Bloch, the principal theoretician of the Expressionist movement, objected to the unbroken, totalized world of literary models like realism, suggesting that perhaps "real" reality is also an interruption (Eysteinnsson 203). In fact, the traumatic events followed by post-traumatic consequences in these realist narratives are reflections of what it really feels like to be in physical and internal torment, which in itself become an interruption and even antagonistic to the normal reality. Even though the narrative is a single coherent piece of life, the story it tells reduces reality to a nightmare, closing the gaps between realism and modernism by making the real look gothic and grotesque. The interruption which modernism prefers in expressions and representations of reality are negotiated with the new paradigm of traumatic reality.

George Luckas criticized modernism for its obsession with madness, with the pathological glorification of the abnormal, and for having severed the ties between subjective experience and objective reality (Eysteinnsson 29). In contrast, realism is understood to have a

one-to-one correspondence to reality and to common sense.<sup>96</sup> If realism is preoccupied with a “world of shared reality,” and “depends on the reader’s willingness to share that reality” (Eysteinnsson 194), then these realist narratives subvert that definition by creating a sphere of an “unshared” reality that not every reader might be “willing” to share. Reality itself becomes morbid, illogical, pathological.

In the wake of structuralist and poststructuralist debates in literary theory, a recurring question has been whether language can give any access to history, or if it can truly refer to anything at all. Caruth, despite being criticized for her poststructuralist approach to trauma, and more specifically being accused of ostensible denial that we can know history through representation, argues for keeping the historical “from being swallowed up by the power of abstraction” (*Unclaimed Experience* 74). For her, the story of an individual experience of trauma not only refers to one’s traumatic past, a past that is “not based on simple models of experience and reference” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 11), it also suggests “the impact of its very incomprehensibility” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 6). The memory of the event of a brutal past — of the bodies in pieces — affirms a difficult past, one whose incomprehensible nature can only be delivered through and rest on a seemingly surreal, dismembered body.

“The splinter in your eye,” states Theodore Adorno, “is the best magnifying glass” (*Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* 26). The truth about this visual metaphor is that human beings are inclined to turn a blind eye to matters not personally pressing or interesting and to look away when the pain and suffering is outside of our own selves and our

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<sup>96</sup> One of the very first Iranian fictional narratives of war is Ahmad Mahmoud’s 1982 novel *Zamin-e Sookhteh* (Scorched Earth), and in poetry, Gheysar Aminpoor’s “Sheri Baraye Jang” (“A Poem about War”). Both register the materiality of mutilation and fragmentation of both psychic and physical wounding in realistic fashion. See Mahmoud, Ahmad. *Scorched Earth*. Tehran, Moin, 2010. See also Aminpoor, Gheysar. “A Poem about War.” Trans. Maryam Ghodrati. *Massachusetts Review, A Quarterly of Literature the Arts and Public Affairs, Special Issue, Casualty* 376-379. 2011.

own bodies. In Elaine Scarry's terminology, cries of pain and suffering that happen outside of ourselves tend to flicker before the eye, making the other an "invisible geography", with the cries of pain like "intergalactic screams" (5). The mutilated human body and psyche becomes a "splinter" in the eye of the reader/viewer and demands a harder look, an empathic engagement from the social and the public. Only a shard, a splinter, in the eye and at the scene can make one pause to see better. This metaphoric, painful, and visual association provides access to a specific form of knowledge: the knowledge of suffering. The hardliner's backlash following the publication of Dehghan's short stories is an affirmation to the splinter in the eye affect, the hand grenade that blows the illusion of stability and homogeneity into pieces.

Critics of Dehghan's vivid and painful representation of physical and psychological post-traumatic suffering have expressed their concern with his negative portrayal of traumatic consequences of war. The shock of each narrative, his critics suggest, is not relevant to the truth. His stories have caused a "splinter in the eye" of critics who, while not denying the existence of the brutal ugly face of postwar conditions for many veterans and civilians, dislike his grotesque illustrations of these facts.<sup>97</sup> Like Sassoon's poetry, Dehghan's narrative is "launched at the reader like a hand grenade" (Stallworthy). And — as in Makhmalbaf's surreal closing of the novel in *Crystal Garden*, or the visual narrative of Haji's mental breakdown in *Marriage of the Blessed*, or Bani Ameri's surreal ending of *Sparrows* — that moment of shock, alienation, disbelief, and disgust which makes realist narratives suddenly seem unreal to readers is the affirmation of an unbreachable gap between the internal havoc of the suffering subject and the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of verbal representation of such extreme experience.

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<sup>97</sup> These group of critics identify with ideological, mythologized, and sacredness of the war and condemn any form of realistic representation as anti-war, anti-Islam, and anti-revolution. See Chizari, Amin. Naghdi bar Man Ghatel-e Pesaretan Hastam ["A Review of Man Ghatel-e Pesaretan Hastam by Ahmad Dehghan."] <http://dour.blogfa.com/post-3.aspx>. Accessed July 10 2019.

Traumatic representations thus blur the distinction between realist and modernist narration, while surrealism, may be the inherent condition of traumatic experience. It follows then that any realist account must employ elements of surreality in order to disorient, to shock, and upset the normative expectations of the reader. If the internal relation of the subject to his or her traumatic experience has the closest proximity to madness, to the unreal, to annihilation and nothingness, the question then is how that sense of nothingness can be represented in literary form *except* through the denial and negation of everyday normality.

Critics who *deny* the madness of traumatic suffering in their wish to normalize the experience of the extraordinary into more hopeful, positive narratives effectively deprive the suffering subject from voicing the hellish torment they endure. They want the grotesque, the ugly, the pessimist, the madman and woman, to remain as *liminal*, or even as *non-existing* realities, to maintain order within the public and protect the status quo.

### **The Promise of Traumatic Realism**

The kind of “empathic unsettlement” that LaCapra prefers to emerge from a trauma narrative might well result from the “hand grenade” or “splinter in the eye” effect of Dehghan’s short stories. Every single story does leave the reader with unforgettable images, yet the desired “working through,” involving a process of mourning that reflects on the historical traumatic event and gives control of their lives back to the affected subjects, also seems capable of hitting a dead end for the sufferers themselves. The subjects that Dehghan focuses on are the very people who have not been situated and acknowledged within the matrix of social and political debate — those whose felt attributes of pain and suffering refer back to their own bodies. As a survivor himself, Dehghan knows well what it means to witness brutality, to lose a beloved friend or



family, to be crippled and endure eternal pain, or to deal with the impossible guilt of survival. In an interview I conducted with the author, he expressed his deep concerns about veterans who are kept in mental institutions and are not allowed any visitors. He mentioned his own repeated flashbacks and nightmares involving all his dead comrades. The stories he tells represent a “crypt”, created by loss, in which he and his characters have buried their harmful memories of traumatic events and the emotions associated with suffering; as Schwab states, “The encrypted self eats away at the traumatized surviving self from the inside, trying to kill it off by severing its ties to the world outside” (3). That is why there is no real connection between Dehghan’s characters and the ordinary world, between them and life. All writing about trauma, Schwab insists “is performed in the shadow of a lost object. Writing is the shadow of an absent voice. Writing assembles an ungrounded body’s fragmented speech” (11).

Dehghan and his characters do not just “act out” their traumas in a loop of melancholia with no resolution, the undesired form of narrative according to LaCapra. For many subjects, the void of loss and traumatic witnessing as well as the endless, day-to-day suffering years after the war can never be justified by any logical reasoning nor by hopes of redemption — particularly for those subjects who remain invisible in the margins of a society desensitized to the post-traumatic conditions of survivors. They not only relive their physical and psychological pain, but also the pain of exclusion and unsympathetic everyday encounters, the pain of social amnesia. The status of their suffering is ongoing and interminable. It is not simply an “acting out” on traumatic memory by their own will, but a memory inscribed in bodily wounds. Thus, for the traumatic realist writer, the “working through” which LaCapra believes can result from narrative falls primarily on the shoulders of the reader. The writers and artists who have experienced trauma personally and have developed an empathic relation with the outcasts of the society have

a different definition of acting out of their traumatic experience. “But then what would art be,” states Adorno, “as the writing of history, if it shook off the memory of accumulated suffering?” (*Aesthetic Theory* 261).<sup>98</sup> Great art, Adorno suggested, looks history right in the face and speaks the unspeakable — and sometimes the unbearable. “It is the suffering of men that should be shared: the smallest step towards their pleasures is one towards the hardening of their pains” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* 26). Contrary to LaCapra’s quest for a representational acting out, writing that opens the possibility for future healing, re-integration, and recuperation, the traumatic knowledge that these traumatic realist authors possess about the impossible personal, social, and political condition of survivors belies any such optimistic, teleological closure to their narratives. From their perspective, it is only through the rejection and negation of that possibility that social and political criticism and change can take place. The negation and rejection of teleological closure happens in Dehghan’s sharp focus on the continuity of pain for a wounded survivor.

Dehghan’s short stories are emptied of emotional content, cold and static; they only relate external reality, tangible facts. For him there no access to *how* it feels inside. The absence of descriptive language is an allusion to an untouchable, loaded, hot spot within. Gabriele Schwab, who was six or seven when her mother showed and told her about a bombed playground full of children’s body parts, registered the image along with the repeated story of the infant brother she never knew, poisoned by the smoke of burning houses and dying a slow and painful death. She became a “silent witness to these war stories, the one not allowed to ask questions or interrupt the flow of words.” She became “an empty vessel to hold a deeper terror that remained untold, a

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<sup>98</sup> This is the last sentence in Adorno’s last, and unfinished, major work.

silence covered by words, a history condemned to secrecy, a deadly guilt and a mute shame handed down as shards of splintered affect.” Regarding these words and stories, she states:

They were supposed to cover up, to mute the pain and guilt and shame, to fill the void of terror. Yet, even as a child, I picked up on something amiss in these stories. That, more than anything else, left me confused. It was as if the words themselves were emptied of the very feelings invoked in me when I was confronted with the facts of horror. It was not that the stories were devoid of emotions but rather that words and emotions did not quite fit together; words echoed with a false ring. (Schwab 43)

The sense of surreality of the stories, seemingly unfamiliar to the reader’s sense of reality, is what both Schwab and Caruth point to as key problems in narrating traumatic experience; that there is still something silenced, and untold, violently cut out by those same stories that are told. “Words could be split into what they said and what they did not say,” Schwab writes, “It was as if they carried a secret that cast me outside” (3). There is a hidden side to traumatic experience, one that remains “unassimilable to the formal system” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 89). In Dehghan’s short stories even chronic conditions of physical suffering, a wounded, diseased, and dying body, carry with them an unsayable story. As Caruth has also pointed out, there is a “difference between living and dying — one which resists being generalized into a conceptual or figural law” (*Unclaimed Experience* 36). Even the objective world of the wounded and dying, different from that of the normal living, finds itself at odds with common language and modes of representation. Subjects of both physical and psychological wounds are fictionalized in short, chilling, and sharp clarity, testifying to an unsayable that will not fit into a formal and conventional narrative, and that there always remains an untold secret.

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### Final Thoughts

On February of 2013, the death of a former Iranian war commander shook news outlets around the country. Both physically and psychologically wounded as a result of the Iran-Iraq war, including due to the use of chemical weapons in the war, he had been living alone in a small, modest house on the outskirts of Tehran for a long time. Four days into his death, the neighbors called the fire department to alert them to the bad smell of the place, and that was when his lifeless body is found. No one had been looking after him, he received no medical care and no loved ones were beside him when he died. The major news networks announced the “martyrdom” of a hero who spent all his life in the battle, but they made sure no one sensed the foul smell from the decomposing body of this secluded hero. The State knew well that this would direct the world’s attention not to an idol, but to the hypocrisy of a system that preached the redemption of the sacrificial body at the same time they left those bodies to rot to their death.

Perhaps no images would serve better to conclude my dissertation than Mehdi Monem’s photograph and Mino Emami’s painting of a feminine figure embracing a prosthetic leg. The subject in the photograph, a victim of a landmine explosion, is so devastated, and even more, so ashamed of her fragmentation that she avoids eye-to-eye contact with the viewer. Her avoidance is different from the females’ inward-looking gaze in Kazem Chalipa’s paintings. Self-blinded by covering her face, she hides her mutilated body, except the prosthetic leg sticking out from under her black cover, evoking the unavoidable reality of her body in pieces. The hidden figure provokes questioning, a much anticipated conversation between the viewer and the subject to discover the truth about the experience, about *how it felt* to be blown up to pieces and yet survive.



Figure 20. Mehdi Monem. War Victims: Iraq - Iran War.

For a female painter like Mino0 Emami, whose expressions of war reflect her personal experience of living with an amputee veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, a prosthetic leg is compulsively repeated in all her art, a reflection of her haunting memory of living with a mutilated body. All her work, however, is devoid of human figures. Years after the death of her husband, her memory of war remains affixed to mutilation, and, in this painting, the memory of her relationship with a veteran is suggested by the image—a close embrace in the form of a drained and exhausted gesture of a feminine arm swirled around a prosthetic leg. The position of the fingers evokes a puzzled and helpless female subject in relationship with a lifeless object. Desire, affection, and compassion all are intertwined with an inanimate object that is itself reminiscent of a brutal past and a difficult present. This fragmentation—the absence of a human figure, a face, and a whole and complete body—represents the physical, emotional, and

psychological damage that never ends for a survivor and to some extent for the witness, splitting the totality of being a human. Both images remain frozen expression of a wordless experience, a chilled gesture that only alludes to a strenuous reality.<sup>99</sup>



Figure 21. Mino Emami. War Collection.

The literary and visual representations of the Iran-Iraq war analyzed in this dissertation interrogate the transition from complete ideological and revolutionary thought in Sacred Defense art toward the more troubled self and narrative in *Gun̄išk'hā bihišt Rā mīfahmand* [Sparrows Understand Heaven] and *Crystal Garden* eventually juxtaposing as well the romanticized and conformist forms of representation in the traumatic realist project of *A Vital Killing*. I have explored moments of extremity, such as the moment of loss and wounding, that are negotiated in the space of the visual and literary construction of personal and collective histories and explored

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<sup>99</sup> For more Mino Emami's art work, please go to <http://emamiminoo.com/> and <http://emamiminoo.com/War-Collection>.



how the body is used as the aesthetic site for the representation of conjoined social and political practices.

The second chapter's focus on the visual arts sets the tone, by examining Iran's official narrative of war in its revolutionary and ideological approach to the experience, politics, and representation of the Iran-Iraq war. Symbolic art in painting portrays the theme of Sacred Defense, and like its literature, it beautifies the landscape of the imposed war with enthusiastic warriors who see the war as God's divine test and the battlefields as a space where they can fight to achieve their perfection. This state-sponsored form and content limits and almost obliterates any other forms of representation in which material reality might pose a threat to the legitimacy of the state.

The third chapter exemplifies an era of transition, lingering between the romanticized narratives of war and its brutal reality, in those who have not experienced brutalities of war firsthand and struggle to find a balance between the concept of martyrdom and death. *Gunġišk'hā bihišt Rā mīfahmand* hides this doubt, transition, and confusion in the ruins of a modernist narrative and, in a photographic story, hints toward the all-too-human characteristics of the heroes and heroines. The imagery of the novel confirms the pictorial quality of traumatic experience and its stark contrast to the official and even more so the journalistic documentation of history, neither of which can record the extremity of emotional and personal aspects of brutal experience.

In *Bagh-e-Bolor [Crystal Garden]*, examined in the fourth chapter, the third-person narrator hints at the impossibility of communicating pain and suffering. Both the physical and psychological pressures of war time remain incommunicable by the characters and are thus narrated through a psychoanalytic social realist form in order to highlight the anxieties of the

suffocating conditions for women and children at the home front when men die in the battle. Amputee veterans with PTSD, along with women and children, occupy the center stage in the theater of misfortunes, a setting where only a surreal impossible register might seem to comply with the material, unbelievable extremes of their life.

In the fifth and last chapter, Ahmad Dehghan's *Man Ghatel-e-Pesaretan Hastam, A Vital Killing*, takes the reader to a whole new level of post-traumatic madness, a state of being where the body itself doesn't remain immune from the ravages of psychic breakdown neither the psyche remains intact from the extremes of bodily wounds. Nothing, in the symbolic landscape of divine beauty, remains intact from the disturbing and nauseating consequences of war.

The revolutionary artist uses the body as a revolutionary trope and rejects fragmentation, unless there is an ideological, nationalist, or revolutionary significance attached to fragments, in order to evoke a positive and nostalgic interpretation. The post-revolutionary and post-war artist and author, however, has a tendency to forget that the human body should remain whole for the sake of a collective identity, because the post-traumatic condition is defined by a lost state of totality and wholeness, overwhelmed by the shattering force of continuous suffering in isolation. In all of the examples, there is an element of deconstruction and unmaking of the totality and of all conventions. The individual is no longer the harbinger of unity and of communal and ideological identity. The postcolonial subject breaks down under the spell of imperialism, because they, too, are made of flesh, nerves, and blood, and because their language, too, like their bodies, resists the extreme and lacks enough strength to deliver what each individual uniquely experiences under the spell of physical and psychological pain. Despite its paradoxical nature, the notion of the absent, unspeakable, unrepresentable, and interminable experience of trauma does not necessarily generate purely negative consequences. Indeed, it points to what

Cathy Caruth has stated about trauma: that, to the extent trauma opens up a gap in experience and a rupture in comprehension, it also opens up possibilities for new experiences and modes of understanding within and between cultures. In this respect, my comparative analysis adds to the shared realm of human experience for those who are subject to pain and suffering. Physical, psychological, and linguistic fragmentation, psychoanalytic and surrealist storytelling all confirm that realism must become traumatic in order to be compatible with post-traumatic life in the modern era. From this perspective, the body becomes the marker of all transformations, ideological, philosophical, psychological, or ethical. “It is through the body” states Kristeva, “that transcendence, understood here as a horizon of possibility for futurity, not as a flight into a metaphysical and disembodied beyond, is possible.”<sup>100</sup>

Despite the attempts of postcolonial and pluralist trauma theorists attempt to discredit deconstructivist and psychoanalytic representations of pain and suffering, the selected texts and authors of my analysis have shown that a commixture and coexistence of the two types of interpretive framework is possible and in fact necessary for representations of minorities, the marginal, and the postcolonial world. The personal and individual in these marginal and minority contexts is usually threatened in favor of collective and totalizing representations that endorse resilience, resistance, and harmony of a collective for a national independence. If there is any expectation of social and political reflection on the pain of the marginal groups through the classic concept of “working through” traumatic experience, that would not be conceivable without first expressing, representing, and communicating its factual debilitating and annihilating nature. The individuals represented in narratives of analysis first and foremost attest to the extremity and chaos of life of marginal survivors and the difficulty and impossibility of delivering *how it feels* to

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<sup>100</sup> Söderbäck, Fanny. “Revolutionary Time: Revolt as Temporal Return.” *Signs*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2012. p. 301.

experience extreme conditions, but by no means are their representations of impossibility devoid of social, political, and historical implication. As Caruth has justifiably points out, survivors “carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (*TEM* 5). The body, in this sense, itself becomes a site of history that further opposes the pluralist and postcolonial anti-psychoanalytic concerns. Pathological as might seem, the symptoms that the characters possess in Dehghan’s narrative, usually uncontrollable and extreme, attest to the collapse of understanding of the traumatic events and the lack of social and political empathy in dealing with the aftermath of traumatic experience. Unintegrated to normal understanding and comprehension, these experiences take control of the traumatized subject: “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, *TEM* 4-5).

The literature and art of trauma displays, as it should, the wounds and pains of repressed individuals. “Trauma narratives go beyond presenting trauma as subject matter or character study,” states Vickroy, “they internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and their structures” (3). An individual is always associated with their particular sociopolitical environment, but before being part of a collective they have the right to be embodied on their own terms. Even though uniquely individual, each human body experiences pain, loss, suffering, poverty, and humiliation, as evident in my comparative analysis, in similar ways.

Mainstream cultural and political interpretations of crisis, catastrophe, and war, as shown in Holocaust or Vietnam war studies, usually differ from survivor accounts. Kali Tal identifies three ways that U.S society has constructed to cope with trauma: “mythologization, medicalization, and denial” (Vickroy 6). Trauma narratives defy and redefine society’s mythical views of itself and subvert the political calculations that tame the individual experiences of post-

traumatic suffering. The moral and ethical distinctions between the victim and victimizer is not the point of discussion in this context, and it is not my purpose to rely on or challenge such binary distinctions; instead, my aim is to rethink the notion of otherness in the face of human suffering and the power of empathic imagination to help alleviate the pain of others.

It is only through the shared realm of experience, a cross-cultural comparative reference, and through a traumatic non-closure that reflects reality, admitting the unsayable nature of traumatic experience, that human societies can resist nationalist, neo-colonial, and neo-imperial political coercion in a violent world and begin to acknowledge social responsibility and bring about change for the marginalized groups. The representation of acting out and an excess of emotions as a result of traumatic suffering opens possibilities for political and social criticism while at the same time it reserves the right of the individual to mourn their loss and communicate their pain and suffering. The impossible, incomprehensible nature of the traumatic experience is a space in which neither homogenous nor completely “particularistic interpretations of violence” can take place (Rothberg 232). Each of the texts analyzed in this dissertation, in their own specific way, engages “a central problem of listening of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of the crisis” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 5).

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